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Oral history interview with John McCracken,
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a digitally recorded interview with John McCracken on April 19 and August 4, 2010. The interview took place at McCracken's home 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.

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

Interview

JUDITH RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards interviewing John McCracken in New York City on April 19, 2010, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc one.

So, John, would you begin by telling me something about your family as far back as you want to go and this – certainly including your grandparents and the relatives that you knew and then coming up to your parents –

JOHN MCCRACKEN: Yes. I'm not sure what to say about those areas.

MS. RICHARDS: Where is your father's side of the family from? And then we'll go to your mother's side.

MR. MCCRACKEN: My dad was born in Nevada, and my mom was born in Kansas. My mother's mother, by the way, was the first woman mayor in the United States.

MS. RICHARDS: What was her name?

MR. MCCRACKEN: I can't remember; I'd have to think about it.

MS. RICHARDS: Your mother's mother, how did that impact on your mother?

MR. MCCRACKEN: I don't know, maybe, maybe not. I mean, it just was a fact.

MS. RICHARDS: So did she go to college, your grandmother?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah – no, I don't know if she did or not, actually. I don't know.

MS. RICHARDS: So you said that was in Kansas?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah. So there you are.

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

MR. MCCRACKEN: Strain.

MS. RICHARDS: Strain. S-T-R-A-I-N?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah. Of course, her mother's maiden name, maybe the name she was as mayor was totally different. Whoops, excuse me. But my grandfather more – well, as much as I remember her, I saw his ghost one time when I was seven years old.

MS. RICHARDS: Well, where was your grandfather from?

MR. MCCRACKEN: I don't know. I don't know where those two were from, actually, unless they were born in Kansas; they could have been, because it was a covered wagon thing several generations ago and all that. But beyond that, I don't know. I can't remember. My sister would know. [They laugh.] She kind of follows that stuff.

MS. RICHARDS: Where did your mother and father meet?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Probably at UC Berkeley [University of California, Berkeley], I think. They both went to UC Berkeley.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Or maybe they met before then. My dad was a cowboy in California, and I think maybe they met there, when he was in California someplace.

MS. RICHARDS: Being a cowboy.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah. Cattle rancher or something.

MS. RICHARDS: How did your mother meet someone managing -

MR. MCCRACKEN: I don't know. I have no idea. [They laugh.] Just did.

MS. RICHARDS: But they both studied at the University of California-Berkeley.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah. Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: What were they studying?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Well, my dad was studying engineering, and my mom was studying teaching and went on to become a teacher and taught high school for a long time. And my dad did a number of things and ended up with a cattle ranch later on.

MS. RICHARDS: So after they graduated, they left Berkeley?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah. We kind of lived all over California, really. Most people don't move a lot and so forth, but it's surprising when people stay where they were born.

MS. RICHARDS: Was that an issue in your childhood, that you were moving a lot?

MR. MCCRACKEN: No, not really. It just happened; I mean, it was slightly traumatic now and then. I know some people go through traumas and so forth; you know, they lose their friends and all that sort of thing, but I never had much of that.

MS. RICHARDS: You said you have a sister?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Two sisters. Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Are they younger?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah. Yeah. They're younger.

MS. RICHARDS: What are their names?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Pamela is the older one, and Margaret is the youngest one.

MS. RICHARDS: Margaret?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Three years younger than me and six years younger than me.

MS. RICHARDS: I didn't ask you, actually, your mother and father's names, their first and last names.

MR. MCCRACKEN: My dad's first name was Harvey, and my mom's was Marjorie, M-A-R-J-O-R-I-E.

MS. RICHARDS: So as you were growing up and moving around, it was all in Northern California?

MR. MCCRACKEN: No, it was all over, clear down to someplace, Ventura, I guess, or farther south, too.

MS. RICHARDS: And that was because your father was -

MR. MCCRACKEN: He was working at various jobs all over the place, kind of -

MS. RICHARDS: Using his engineering?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, and he didn't finish his engineering degree, but worked in that field and worked in various capacities all over the place. For a while he was the master mechanic at the Port of Oakland, for example, later on, working for big companies that have orange trees and lemon trees and all that sort of thing.

MS. RICHARDS: What did he do for that kind of company?

MR. MCCRACKEN: I don't know, he invented a smokeless [smudge pot ?] once. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: It sounds like he could do anything type of person.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Just about, just about. Yeah. In California later, too, before he had the cattle ranch and just about the time I was old enough to leave for the navy, he had a - [inaudible] - he had a tractor agency near Mount Shasta and had that for a while, and then he got the cattle ranch after that.

MS. RICHARDS: Where did you mostly go to elementary school?

MR. MCCRACKEN: All over California.

MS. RICHARDS: So was it -

MR. MCCRACKEN: I probably went to six or eight of them; I don't know.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you remember, when you were going to all those schools, what subjects seemed of most interest?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Not really very much. Once somebody asked me what I wanted to be, and I said, a chemist. But I think that wasn't in grammar school; it might have been in junior high or something like that.

MS. RICHARDS: So in grammar school, you just - the focus was your life outside the classroom?

MR. MCCRACKEN: I guess. I don't know. It's kind of an area of my life, I can remember little incidents, but it's mostly hazy.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you do a lot of exploring on a bike, that kind of thing?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah. Rode bikes. Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Played sports?

MR. MCCRACKEN: No, not too much sports, just a little bit, tennis for a while.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you remember doing drawings and paintings?

MR. MCCRACKEN: I was always drawing, yeah, so people tend to remember me as being an artist, you know -

MS. RICHARDS: Even in elementary school?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, and then it was kind of cartoons along the side of my notebook and that sort of thing.

MS. RICHARDS: Telltale sign. [They laugh.] Was there anything that you and your family, or just you, did in the summers on a regular basis?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, well, let's see, things like when I was really young going to Yosemite [National Park, CA], for example, which is memorable, back in the old days.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you camp?

MR. MCCRACKEN: No, stayed in a cabin, yeah, a cabin, and what other things? The next things I remember, really, were likely - at that time, we lived in Oakland [CA], not at the Yosemite time, but a little later on. And from Oakland, we started going to Northern California by Shasta to visit friends up there who had a cattle ranch, and got acquainted with that country, and that's what, I think, helped lead us up there, or lead them up there, and my dad to get an agency and then a cattle ranch. So we took vacations up there several summers.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you ride horses and take care of the animals?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah. Yeah. I did cattle work and all that stuff.

MS. RICHARDS: What about when you got to going to high school, was that a more settled period? Were you in the same high school?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Well, high school was up there. We had moved up there, and then I went to high school.

MS. RICHARDS: What town was that that you lived in?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yreka, Y-R-E-K-A. Some Indian name.

MS. RICHARDS: Y-R-E-K-A.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, I started high school in Oakland, and just started, and then we moved, and so I was up there.

MS. RICHARDS: So in high school, what were you most involved in?

MR. MCCRACKEN: I was the usual artist, I guess.

MS. RICHARDS: Were there art classes that you could take?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, yeah, sure.

MS. RICHARDS: And you took them?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah. Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you get feedback and positive comments?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Some of them, but I think – I stayed fairly unfocused in terms of art. I didn't know what art was even, you know, especially what fine art was, so to speak. But after graduating, then I joined the navy.

MS. RICHARDS: So going back to high school for a second, were there projects that you did that used your drawing skills? There were posters or hobbies or any kind of things that you made that –

MR. MCCRACKEN: A little bit. I did a little bit of sign painting, I mean, just a small amount.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you work in high school, you know, part-time jobs?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, usually I did farm work, hauling hay and mowing hay and bailing hay and all that sort of thing and cowboy work and everything.

MS. RICHARDS: So why did you end up deciding to join the navy?

MR. MCCRACKEN: I don't know.

MS. RICHARDS: You wanted to go into the military, and then you picked the navy, or you wanted to go into the navy?

MR. MCCRACKEN: No, I wanted to go to the military, and I picked the navy. I kind of decided between the air force and the navy. And the navy kept saying, join the navy, see the world, so I just did, and I don't even like the water either. [They laugh.] So I don't know.

MS. RICHARDS: But it was the "see the world" that appealed.

MR. MCCRACKEN: I guess so. That's kind of what I remembered.

MS. RICHARDS: Wasn't that during the Korean War?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Actually, it was; it was.

MS. RICHARDS: So was there an issue that you might actually be involved?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, I suppose so, but it turned out that it was kind of the last part of the Korean War. So even though I got a ribbon for that and so forth, I saw very little in the way of what you call action.

MS. RICHARDS: So what did you do? It was four years, right?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah. Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Tell me about those four years.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Well, they were miserable. [They laugh.] I went through the worst storm I've ever seen in my life and ever, ever lived through in my life.

MS. RICHARDS: While you were on a ship?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah. Yeah. Well, I went aboard; I was trained as a sonar man, which means, you know, being – [inaudible].

MS. RICHARDS: Training on a base in California.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah. Yeah. In San Diego. When you train at sonar, you either become anti-submarine or, you know, surface or minesweeper. And I ended up on a minesweeper. It was a wooden minesweeper, and it was actually a wooden ship that was the last wooden ship class that the navy ever had.

MS. RICHARDS: Did the ship have a name?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah. It was called *Force*, USS *Force*.

MS. RICHARDS: F-O-R-C-E.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] It's three and a half miles down at the bottom of the ocean now.

MS. RICHARDS: How do you know that?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Because I looked it up online and found out what happened to it, later on after I was on it.

MS. RICHARDS: After you were off it, probably. So you were talking about the storm.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Well, what they do is they sent - you know, I went to school; I went to sonar school and minesweeper, sonar school, wherever it is, went first to boot camp and all of that. And then I was part of a bunch of people, one of a bunch of people who were flown up to Tacoma, Washington, to put this new ship into commission, which was the *Force*. So it took awhile, and then everybody went to sea. We voyaged out to sea to go to Long Beach [CA], which was going to be our home port. Nobody had been to sea for very long, I mean, nobody had been to sea for a while. And a big typhoon hit the coast right then as we were going out, and it was awful.

It was just totally awful. I mean, I hate to describe some of the things that happened, you know, people throwing up and then that throw up staying on the decks and sweeping away your shoes and everything like that, and the ship just reeking like hell. And the pitching and everything else being so bad you just couldn't even think. People are just crawling to work, and it was the worst scene.

MS. RICHARDS: How long did it go on?

MR. MCCRACKEN: About three days. People were sick, though, for a couple more days after that. It was terrible, and didn't see the captain the whole time. The ship almost got out of control and capsized because the guy steering it was lying on the deck just holding onto the wheel like this. It was just kind of bizarre. And so it was of one of the worst experiences I've gone through. But, in a sense, it turned out to be kind of interesting, one of the most interesting, to be in that situation, just really, really odd.

MS. RICHARDS: Was that the first time you were actually on a ship?

MR. MCCRACKEN: No, I had been on ships before because a lot of the training, the training was on ships. And also I had been aboard another minesweeper, an earlier model of a minesweeper, a metal one for a while before then also. And then we trained on destroyers and so forth doing anti-submarine things.

MS. RICHARDS: Any interesting adventures on the positive side?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Well, just sailing. I mean, yeah, because, like, being at sea was sometimes exhilarating, just the horizon all the way around. And sometimes it would be sunny, and I [would] just lie on the deck, you know, outside and just sort of half asleep, and there were a lot of times like that that were nice and very cool to be at sea.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you get to draw and sketch?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Some. They'd have me do - well, I was the ship's - I did a whole lot of things on the ship, actually. I was training officer, which meant showing slides, and I did crypto things, which is code. I didn't do the code machine, but I learned to type by typing the alphabet over and over, scrambled, you know, 26 times scrambled, so I'd have to look at the list and not look at my hands. So I learned how to type that way. And I was the ship's artist, too, because I painted signs and certificates and that sort of thing.

MS. RICHARDS: Admiral's birthday card.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, that kind of thing. Yeah. And I'd go get the movies, strap on a gun and go get the movies, and go get the - did I tell you I had to get the mail? I think I just got the movies.

MS. RICHARDS: You mean, when you were in port?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you see action during the war?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Once we were in some port, where the heck were we, anyway? In Japan or near Japan. I forget exactly where it was. But there was a squadron - I can't quite remember, there were five ships in our thing; I think it was a squadron, you know, minesweepers.

And the five and a bunch of other ships headed out toward the Yangtze River in China, because an airplane had gone down, an American airplane, and we wanted to go search for the plane and pilot and so forth. But we got out there a bunch of miles, and a typhoon hit and chased us away - we're smaller than minesweepers - and chased minesweepers back in.

The water was so rough that nobody could tie up at dock. But people tried to, and they bashed the sides of the ships in and almost sank us all. [They laugh.] We managed to tie up to a pier, but there was a crane right next to the pier, and it fell on top of the ship and started grinding the bridge to pieces. And we were out there with axes; we grabbed a bunch of axes and jumped up onto the crane to try to cut the cables. But the axes were bronze, and the reason is that - these wooden ships, the reason they're wood is that they're non-magnetic.

And so the heads of the - the parts of the engines, the heads were aluminum, and the axes were bronze because they're not magnetic. And so they weren't strong enough to cut the steel cable. So they ended up using dynamite or [sharp-shaped ?] charges to do it. But, anyway, we all ended up in dry dock, and we got a brand new bridge made by an expert Japanese craftsman. So it was Japan.

MS. RICHARDS: So did that mean you got to spend time on land in Japan?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: And look around?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: That was your first time -

MR. MCCRACKEN: Personally, I'm not sure if it was the first time. I spent a little time in Hawaii, I mean, not much, but only a week on the way there, and then we went to Guam and actually went to Hong Kong once. It must have been after we got the ship.

MS. RICHARDS: When you were on land then in Japan, did you see anything that was interesting? Did you get to explore any -

MR. MCCRACKEN: Well, it was interesting to be in Japan. It was. And one thing I really remember there is the smells; everything smells different there. You walk through Japanese towns and villages, and it's a very different smell and, of course, the different customs and different everything. I went on a bus tour once, but the Japanese girl was talking in Japanese, so I didn't know what she was saying.

But it was just interesting being there. What else was I going to say about Japan? Well, we did go to Hokadodi [ph], or Hokkaido rather, the northern islands. And that was more old-fashioned. One of the officers said - and that's a die-hard area, kind of. This was in the '50s, of course. It was not too long after the war, and it didn't feel there was a war feeling anymore or anything like that.

It was interesting, just interesting being there, but more primitive - I mean, not primitive, but more old-fashioned and not quite so up-to-date or starting to get up-to-date, as areas near Tokyo and that sort of thing. And I was about this tall, much taller than everybody else, in whatever crowd I walked around in.

But anyway, we also went to southern Japan, besides, you know, down to Sasabo and I forget what the island is down there, and then on to Hong Kong, and just spent a week in Hong Kong.

MS. RICHARDS: Were you eager, or did you happen to see any specific cultural attractions, museums or temples? Anything of that sort, monuments?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Kind of a few. I remember going to see a tiger balm gardens, but you know, I'm not sure if that was in Japan or in Hong Kong. It sounds Chinese, doesn't it? So it probably was there. Just saw a few things in Japan.

MS. RICHARDS: Were there fellow sailors who you were friends with who had an interest in cultural things as you did?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Kind of. Kind of. I wasn't overbearingly interested in culture by myself, but all of us kind of went around to a few things anyway and saw this and that. Like I told you, I took that bus tour and can't remember what we saw. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: Where else did you go in the four years?

MR. MCCRACKEN: I guess it was mostly there. Let me see, did we go anywhere else on that side of the world? I guess it was pretty much those places: Guam and Midway and, you know, and Hawaii and Japanese places, maybe another port or two in Japan. And other than that - I guess when we first sailed down, did we go to San Francisco first, right at first? We might have, but then, anyway, we went to Long Beach, where we were stationed, and took cruises from there and so forth.

MS. RICHARDS: At what point during the four years did you start thinking about what you wanted to do when you get out of the service?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Well, we went through the navy, and I was just about to get out, and I started to think about that. And so I went down to what was called Lower Sound. Ships have a transducer underneath them that have sonar. It's a bulb that hangs down underneath the ship. And we go down through hatches and so forth, and then you go down into there and close the hatch and just be all by yourself, you know, the bottom of the ship.

So I went down there and just sort of sat and thought, and I just thought, well, I've always done art; I guess I'll go to art school.

MS. RICHARDS: Was that the first time you had that idea?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah. That's the first time I actually just decided that. It seemed like a slightly arbitrary decision, but I didn't know what else to decide, so I decided that. So I did that.

MS. RICHARDS: Did your mother and father, did they voice approval, disapproval, surprise? Not any reaction?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Not that I remember.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you use the G.I. Bill?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah. Yeah, with a massive \$110 a month.

MS. RICHARDS: So then you had to decide where you would study?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah. I forget if I did when I was still in the navy or just afterward, but I decided between the [California] College of Arts and Crafts [now California College of the Arts] in Oakland and the College of Fine Arts [California School of Fine Arts, now San Francisco Art Institute (1961)] in San Francisco. I'm not sure why I focused on the Bay Area, but I did, and I picked Arts and Crafts, and I went there for four years.

MS. RICHARDS: So you started that - see, what year would that be?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Fifty-seven.

MS. RICHARDS: Fifty-seven. Yeah.

MR. MCCRACKEN: I think.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah. When you were 23, about, and you lived - you found an apartment for yourself in Oakland?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah. Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you know at that point that you'd need to work to support yourself, or was the G.I. Bill going to cover all your expenses?

MR. MCCRACKEN: No, I worked in odd jobs. I did odd jobs. I was a sign painter for a while. I did a lot of sign painting and did a little bit of electronic stuff at school, and I don't know what else. Oh, and summers, too, I went to the Shasta area and worked for the [U.S.] Forest Service for a couple of summers. So that's what I did.

MS. RICHARDS: When you started CCA.

MR. MCCRACKEN: CCAC.

MS. RICHARDS: CCAC. It was a four-year program that you were beginning.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, it's a college. Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: And did you start out with a particular focus in mind there?

MR. MCCRACKEN: You know, I started out thinking, I suppose, I'll be some kind of commercial artist or illustrator or that sort of thing. Before I had been there a couple of years, I had conversations and meetings in a cafeteria and looking at magazines and so forth clued me in as to what fine art was. And I thought, hey; so that's when I started thinking about that. I usually consider that in '59 I started doing that kind of art. I was painting at that time.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you start going to museums at that point in the Bay Area?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah. Yeah, and also looking at magazines very closely. I looked at magazines probably more than even seeing museums. *Artforum* was a pretty communicative tool at that time in arts and so forth, and I felt like I was beginning to interact with artists in wider areas, including New York.

MS. RICHARDS: The fellow students, I mean, some of whom were your age, but some were younger because you had gone to the navy, were there, were there any students who you met in those first - the first year or two who turned out to be important friends and -

MR. MCCRACKEN: The only one I can remember - and there might be a few more - but Dennis Oppenheim was in *Arts and Crafts* at the same time. He's the only one I can remember. There are others, I think, did become artists, but probably most of them that I knew - well, it's hard to tell, you know; some did become regular painters, kind of fine art painters. But I guess the best known, as far as I know, was Dennis, and there are probably others that I'm just forgetting.

MS. RICHARDS: So as you're starting out - you're taking traditional art school program: painting, drawing, et cetera, and you were looking at *Artforum* and seeing what was going on; what did you feel most personally drawn to? What kind of work?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Minimal work, mostly, like Barnett Newman.

MS. RICHARDS: That was the very first thing you were drawn to, was Minimal?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah. And [Donald] Don Judd and the rest of the people - [inaudible, cross talk].

MS. RICHARDS: So does that mean you're interested in [Piet] Mondrian?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, Mondrian. Mondrian, actually, kind of -

MS. RICHARDS: Russian Constructivists and other artists who had -

MR. MCCRACKEN: I guess I was interested in [Kazimir] Malevich, but mainly it was Mondrian; at first Mondrian and then Barnett Newman and Don Judd and so forth - you know, [Carl] Andre and - [inaudible, cross talk].

MS. RICHARDS: During your time at CCAC, did you take art history courses, as well as studio?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Sure. Yeah. Sure.

MS. RICHARDS: And so you were able to -

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, I remember most of the art history classes being a little bit more historical, except that there were things like Egyptian; Egyptian work really struck me. So that was an even earlier thing, especially some of their architecture and a few other things from other cultures: Trojans and so forth - and Troy, yeah, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: And other ancient civilizations?

MR. MCCRACKEN: A few, a few.

MS. RICHARDS: Stonehenge.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Somewhat.

MS. RICHARDS: Did it bring back memories of anything you had seen in Japan?

MR. MCCRACKEN: No, I don't think so. Not that I can think of at the moment. You'd think it might, because there are some minimal things there, but I don't remember being struck by anything along that nature, or art area, so much.

MS. RICHARDS: At that point, what kind of ideas about art and the function of art were developing in your mind in those early years? I mean -

MR. MCCRACKEN: Well, when things begin to really kind of form, and I was beginning to do, well, you would call Minimal work, I was thinking largely in terms of a quality I called "being," trying to make something, trying to make things, [not] refer to things so much, but have their own being.

So it - kind of as if they're - [inaudible] - to the - sort of a future. I finally used a metaphor a few times, have used a metaphor that, well, if I were an alien, if I were a UFO character and came here and left something here, what would I leave, you know, kind of something from a foreign culture, but something that has some relationship to human culture and has its own being, but has being - that also interacts with human culture or whatever or galactic culture or whatever.

MS. RICHARDS: So did you ever think about or read anything about Zen Buddhism or the artists in the Northwest who were kind of thinking in those similar ideas?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, I read that stuff. Yeah. Yeah. Zen and various other philosophy things, things that, too, that were kind of popular in the '60s.

MS. RICHARDS: Late '50s.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Late '50s. Yeah. And later I read a lot of Jung, Carl Jung.

MS. RICHARDS: While you were still at CCAC?

MR. MCCRACKEN: No, I think maybe it was after that - and a little later on, a lot of books on psychic things and stuff like that.

MS. RICHARDS: Going back to your years in art school, I think I saw some images of early, kind of gestural abstraction that you were doing in art school in the late '50s.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah. Yeah. That first painting I mentioned is '59.

MS. RICHARDS: There were a few paintings.

MR. MCCRACKEN: - or something like that, kind of Abstract Expressionist, really. And then a little bit - well, then a little bit Zen-y, two of them.

MS. RICHARDS: There were some artists who might have been with you at CCAC like Ralph Goings or - of course, [Wayne] Thiebaud was earlier.

MR. MCCRACKEN: He was at a different place, too, I think, wasn't he? He was in Sacramento, wasn't he?

MS. RICHARDS: But a little earlier -

[Cross talk.]

MR. MCCRACKEN: - artist working at that time.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah, yeah.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Well, also, though, speaking of that, there are - Ron Davis was across the bay at the other school, the Fine Arts in -

MS. RICHARDS: Did you meet him while you were still a student?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah. Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: So there was communication between the two schools?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Well, you know, we just met briefly.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you explore the San Francisco art world or the scene there -

MR. MCCRACKEN: A little bit.

MS. RICHARDS: - when you were there?

MR. MCCRACKEN: A little bit. Actually, I worked over there, too. That was another job I forgot I had. I did gold-leaf work at a frame shop - [laughs] - where you take a little brush, and you go like this and get a little electricity, pick up a little gold leaf, and stick it on something, a frame, and all that kind of stuff.

So that was kind of interesting, technique-wise, you know. And that gave me a slight opportunity to look around San Francisco, too, kind of a walking city and all of that.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MR. MCCRACKEN: But as soon as I got going in art, though, with art, I realized that nothing was happening in the Bay Area at all for me, and I had to go to L.A., Los Angeles.

MS. RICHARDS: When you were in school still, and you moved away from the gestural abstraction, you started doing more geometric abstraction -

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: - and I saw some images, paintings, that had different patterns.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Right.

MS. RICHARDS: They weren't totally -

MR. MCCRACKEN: Right, the geometry things that -

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah, the different - do you recall how those evolved?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Well, it was sort of funny. I didn't really plan it, but the paintings got a little bit more and more geometrical. Some of them were jumbled geometrical, and then they got a little more ordered geometrical, so to speak, and then started turning physical.

So some of the paintings then became like lacquered surfaces and so forth, like objects halfway between sculpture and - painting and sculpture. And then they got slots in them.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MR. MCCRACKEN: So a painting had - I mean, a sculpture had a slot and -

MS. RICHARDS: And what was the paint that you were using? Were you using oil then or -

MR. MCCRACKEN: No, those are all lacquer - automotive lacquer.

MS. RICHARDS: When you were doing the -

MR. MCCRACKEN: Well, no, some of them were painted. There were some that were partly canvas and partly lacquer, for example, and so they were combinations, and then they became all lacquer, and then it became all sculpture, but there was still frontal. And then they jumped from frontal to three-dimension[al].

MS. RICHARDS: When you were a student, were you keeping a sketchbook -

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yes.

MS. RICHARDS: - at CCA?

MR. MCCRACKEN: I guess I did. Yeah, I started - I did it from sketches. One of my sketchbooks was published just a short period -

MS. RICHARDS: That one started in '64, that sketchbook.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Okay, that's really the first one.

MS. RICHARDS: So that was after - so when you were a college student - I mean, an art school student - you

actually weren't keeping a sketchbook or a journal or -

MR. MCCRACKEN: No, I don't remember. I must have been doing drawings, because then that's how I would make the pieces, except not for - well, no, I did even for the geometric paintings.

MS. RICHARDS: So for those paintings, you developed them with drawings in advance.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah.

[Cross talk.]

MS. RICHARDS: But were those drawings always just preparatory drawings for paintings, or did you ever remember doing drawings as final works of art?

MR. MCCRACKEN: No, they were pretty much preparatory, yeah. Yeah. And the sketchbook drawings later on, too, were kind of like a memory. I figured, well, the way to keep track of it was, you just stick them all down even if you don't - you're not going to make them all.

It gives you a visual - a physical memory of your train of thought and so forth, and then you can - so, what I often did was just go back and pick something out. Sometimes I would pick something out six times and never make it. [They laugh.]

MS. RICHARDS: I wanted to ask you about that sketchbook, but just a couple of other things before that. So before you even left school, your work had evolved into these relieflike objects. They still were on the wall, but they were objects. And you said they were lacquer and -

MR. MCCRACKEN: Well, they were that way, and then they'd turn into frontal sculptures with the slots. And at that time - so I was teaching - I wasn't teaching. At the school was Tony Delap -

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MR. MCCRACKEN: - and John Coplans, and they kind of saw me work, and I think they kind of said, well, maybe - [inaudible]. Through, I think, their suggestions, Nick Wilder [Nicholas Wilder Gallery, Los Angeles, CA] came to see me when I was in Oakland and -

MS. RICHARDS: He saw you at school, in your studio at school?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah. Was it - or else -

MS. RICHARDS: Or did you have a separate studio?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Well, it was at school. I'm not sure. I'm not sure, but I had decided anyway at that time - I had already graduated and was doing some graduate work, and I thought, well, I will either -

MS. RICHARDS: So you got your B.F.A.?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, and then I went ahead and got this bright idea, I thought, for making sculptures, and I just launched into it because it was just like, I'm going to make those. And I thought, well, I will either show these in a gallery, or I will use these as my graduate show, whichever happens first.

MS. RICHARDS: Your M.F.A. show?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah. Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: You know, I just realized I skipped one important element, to ask you where you were born. We sailed through this.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Well, let's see if I can remember. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: I know you were born in 1934. It was the exact date and location.

MR. MCCRACKEN: In Berkeley - Berkeley [on December 9, 1934].

MS. RICHARDS: That's why your parents were still in Berkeley.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Well, no, I don't think they were living there then. She just - my mom went there just to have me. I don't know where they were living. They could have been living in Berkeley but I don't think they were. I think they were living in Oakland or someplace, or maybe someplace else. I don't know.

MS. RICHARDS: Okay, so, sorry; go back to that time when Nick Wilder –

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, he came to – it must have been my studio. Did I have a studio? I guess I did. I started working in an upstairs apartment, spraying lacquer. But we just – we arranged a show. Was it that year? Anyway, it happened in '65.

MS. RICHARDS: How did you feel about that? I mean, it was quite amazing and astonishing, especially in those years, to have an exhibition before you're barely out of school.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah. Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: You must have been very excited.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, I was. I wasn't totally blown over or blown away by it because – maybe because I just sort of planned it. I just thought, I'm going to do this – [laughs] – and I did it.

MS. RICHARDS: You'd say you were ambitious.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: And you were a little older than the other students because you'd been in the navy.

MR. MCCRACKEN: A little bit, yeah, most of them, yeah – not all of them; most of them.

MS. RICHARDS: Had you known of that gallery?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, yeah. In fact, let's see – that reminds me, because when I was doing that show, that group of work, I studied pretty hard the galleries in Los Angeles, I mean, remotely, not like going down there. And I had three of them picked out as possibilities and Nick was one of them, Nick Wilder. Ferus [Gallery] was another one, and there was another one I can't remember.

MS. RICHARDS: You were just looking at the best.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, but fortunately, Nick Wilder came to see me before anything happened, before I – because I was going to go down there somehow with my work, I guess.

MS. RICHARDS: So when you were doing this body of work, as you said, you were envisioning it as either an exhibition in a commercial gallery or your M.F.A. show.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, right.

MS. RICHARDS: Could it be both?

MR. MCCRACKEN: I suppose. I suppose.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you end up then having a show doing another body of work to – or did you get an M.F.A.?

MR. MCCRACKEN: No, I didn't. No, I just went gallery directly.

MS. RICHARDS: So he came and saw you before you even finished school –

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: – and asked you to have a show. And that show took place, I think, in 1965?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you actually physically bring the works to Los Angeles yourself in a truck or –

MR. MCCRACKEN: You know, I think – excuse me – I might have; either that, or they were shipped down there, but – maybe I did take them down. I'm not sure. I can't quite remember.

MS. RICHARDS: And you installed it, I mean, in terms of deciding where things should be, or did Nick?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Nick and I both did, yeah. And he was pretty good at that, so he did a large – you know, quite a bit of it.

MS. RICHARDS: Were you pleased with the way it looked in the gallery?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, yeah, it was fine.

MS. RICHARDS: And what about the reception that it received from –

MR. MCCRACKEN: That was fine, too. A lot of artists came, who I knew and liked, and a few things were sold for astronomically low prices. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: But they were prices you would discuss with Nick.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, yeah, so it was just fine. It was fine. I'm not – don't mean to complain about it at all.

MS. RICHARDS: So some of these pieces were on the wall. Some of these pieces were on pedestals.

MR. MCCRACKEN: No, I don't think there were any on the wall. There might have been one on the wall, actually, as a matter of fact, and then one largish one was on the floor in the west wing on pedestals.

MS. RICHARDS: So the issue of putting this sculpture on a pedestal wasn't a problem, in your mind?

MR. MCCRACKEN: No, no. It does present a problem that I call "the [Constantin] Brancusi problem," but it worked okay with those.

MS. RICHARDS: But he made his own pedestals. Did you imagine doing that?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Nick?

MS. RICHARDS: No, Brancusi.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Oh, no, no, no. I always tried to make pedestals that would kind of differentiate from the pieces too, even though they might be the same shape and not all that much bigger. But you make them, like, the same size and just going on down, and then you start to have a problem – and change the colors, too. Just a white pedestal, in a way, is neutral, like a white wall, you know.

MS. RICHARDS: Those pieces, you said they were lacquered. They were sprayed on wood?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: And they were – were they basically two colors each?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Most of them were. Maybe one was three, but they were either two or three. Most of them were two.

MS. RICHARDS: What was the idea of making those pieces with that restrictive palette in those particular colors?

MR. MCCRACKEN: I don't know if I had an idea or not, because I was into simplicity and so forth, but, you know, that's one of those ideas – and one of the things I wrote down in my sketchbook at some point was that these things seemed to me – something like this – these things seemed to me like aliens who are channeling themselves here through me, and I don't really quite know why or what they are.

So I mean, having that idea of those particular sculptures was a little bit like that. They just kind of occurred to me or – and I invented them without, you know, without reasoning them out or having an aesthetic behind it producing them or supporting them. So it's kind of like, mostly I don't know.

MS. RICHARDS: It was intuitive.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, yeah, very, yeah, and visual, too. I always made work up by visual – you know, visualizing them, just visualizing things and see if they would make it, see if they were strong.

And often the way I did that was to visualize them with other works, whether they're Mondrians or Judds or whoever, and see if they held up – see if they not only held up but seemed to have a conversation of some kind.

It was more that than, I think, working off of an aesthetic or working off of something like an aesthetic or whatever. And also, I was trying to have these things be beams too. They were kind of like heads and so forth, with fronts and – those first ones.

MS. RICHARDS: You talked about them having a presence.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: And that seems to connect to the kind of power that some people see in ancient art.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: And you talked earlier – I don't think we got a chance to hear the story about when you were very young and saw your grandfather. Does that connect to this?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Not too much.

MS. RICHARDS: No. Okay.

MR. MCCRACKEN: It just happened and kind of clued me into a little bit of the metaphysical area or whatever you want to call it.

MS. RICHARDS: The power of the unseen.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, yeah, yeah. And, let's see –

MS. RICHARDS: So you had this show, and some of the works – it was intriguing to look at the titles of the pieces that seemed to relate to ancient work.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Oh, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: I mean, there were things related to ancient cities, Indian or Eastern associations – Naxos [Cyclades, Greece], Zapotec [Pre-Columbian Mexico].

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: What was the – do you recall what you wanted to tell the viewer when you gave them those titles?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Those I usually thought up in a way similar to how I thought up the sculptures. I just kind of would find names of things, places and so forth, that I liked and that served as titles but didn't illustrate – didn't seem to illustrate the pieces and weren't – again, didn't have bodies of ideas and all kinds of associations.

In fact, too many associations are no good. I wanted something that's kind of neutral but has a little bit of color to it or something, so that it could stand as a name and not interfere too much with the piece, and yet carry it – you know what I mean – kind of indicated it and that kind of thing.

MS. RICHARDS: When you had that show, was there an understanding with Nick that you would – he would be representing you, and that you –

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: – and that you would be having another show there?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, which happened, yeah. I was showing with him for I don't know how many years, a few years.

MS. RICHARDS: So at that point you moved to L.A. –

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: – and started your life as an artist.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Where did you live when you first moved to L.A.?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Let's see, what was the first place? Was it Costa Mesa – because I lived down there. Oh, and I actually taught at Irvine [University of California, Irvine], too. At some point I started teaching at Irvine. Where did I first live, anyway, because I had a studio right in Venice and –

MS. RICHARDS: So you didn't live in the same place you worked?

MR. MCCRACKEN: No, I did, but I'm not sure if I lived in Venice first or in Costa Mesa first. Maybe I lived in Costa Mesa first; I don't know. Probably I did. I think I did. And then I was in a little studio in Venice after that for a while, several years.

MS. RICHARDS: Working/living space. What street was it on in Venice?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Well, it was called West Washington then. Now it's called Abbot Kinney [Boulevard], right in the middle of Venice.

MS. RICHARDS: Was it amidst other artists working -

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, there were other artists on both sides of me, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Who were they?

MR. MCCRACKEN: John Altoon was right next door, and Billy [Al] Bengston was three or four blocks away, and - I have a name block. Who did the gas stations and all that sort of thing?

MS. RICHARDS: Ed Ruscha?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, Ruscha and both Dills.

MS. RICHARDS: Laddie?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, Laddie John. And, let's see -

MS. RICHARDS: DeWain Valentine?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, he was there, too. In fact, he was one of the first artists I met there.

MS. RICHARDS: How did you meet him?

MR. MCCRACKEN: I don't know; I just ran into him.

MS. RICHARDS: Ran into him at a bar -

MR. MCCRACKEN: No.

MS. RICHARDS: - at a supermarket, a beach? [Laughs.]

MR. MCCRACKEN: I don't know. It just - I mean, that area is kind of - maybe I went to see him -

[Cross talk.]

MS. RICHARDS: Did you have a car?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Did I have a car? I must have had a car. I guess I did. I don't know. I must have, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: You don't remember your car?

MR. MCCRACKEN: No.

MS. RICHARDS: The color and -

MR. MCCRACKEN: No, although I know I had a -

MS. RICHARDS: Given all that had been discussed about carpet issues -

MR. MCCRACKEN: No, because Joe Goode shot a calendar once - I don't know if you've ever seen that, but that was one of those - and at that time I had an International - it was like an SUV, but it was made by International. But I don't know what I had before that. I might have had a VW, I don't know. I don't remember.

MS. RICHARDS: What was your studio like?

MR. MCCRACKEN: It was long and narrow, just like the long and narrow planks I started making.

[Cross talk.]

MS. RICHARDS: And you said that you lived there, as well.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, I did. I did.

MS. RICHARDS: You were using lacquer. Was there an issue with fumes and -

MR. MCCRACKEN: Not so much, because I put in exhaust fan and – [inaudible] – and wore masks and all that stuff.

MS. RICHARDS: What was Nick Wilder like to work with?

MR. MCCRACKEN: He was great. He was kind of always under the wire financially, just like I was. [Laughs.] But he was really great and extremely perceptive. He could look at a painting and just start talking about it, and it would just unfold in front of your face. It was really weird.

And he was very sharp business-wise too, and just a very good man. And he, pretty soon, arranged a show for me with – I forget which happened first now – oh, I know, with Elkon [Gallery] in New York.

A lot of dealers don't do that. They kind of hold onto you. They don't want you to show anywhere else, but he got me to doing that, and also showed with [Galerie Ileana] Sonnabend in Paris. He got both of those going. So he was really selflessly active and a pleasure to work with.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you admire the other artists – the work of the other artists he showed?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, yeah, yeah. He showed Joe Goode, actually, and also Ron Davis and Richard Tuttle and – who else? I can't think of who else now but a bunch of people that – it was a gallery I liked being in. In that respect, it was very nice. It was kind of like Ferus, you know, like they were a group, too, that was more or less allied with each other and so forth.

MS. RICHARDS: And you stayed in touch with John Coplans –

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: – and were talking about, then, at the same time, I think it was, you started teaching –

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: – at UC Irvine.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: And that was through John?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Or Tony – I'm not sure – Delap, because he was teaching there. I forget if John was –

MS. RICHARDS: You knew him from CCAC to UC Irvine?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, I did, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Delap?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, right, right.

MS. RICHARDS: Were you teaching as a way of making money, or did you have a real interest in teaching?

MR. MCCRACKEN: No, I was kind of teaching to make money. [They laugh.] But, you know, not totally – not just because as of a job, but it was an interesting one in the art area.

MS. RICHARDS: And you commuted – you still lived in L.A., and you drove to Irvine.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Let's see, how did that work anyway? I was trying to think; I might have taught at UCLA [University of California, Los Angeles]. But I guess it was after moving to Costa Mesa. Then I started, from there, teaching at – [inaudible]. I think that's how it was. I think I wasn't teaching there anymore by the time I lived in Venice.

MS. RICHARDS: Then you were teaching at UCLA?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, except – let's see. No, I remember a two-hour commute for a while, so maybe I was for a while.

MS. RICHARDS: When you first got to L.A., in this first couple of years, did you sense the influence of being there, whether it was the light and the landscape or the people or the sense of being in a gallery with other artists in a kind of competitive – I mean, what was the impact of being in L.A. on you, do you think, and everything that was going on there?

MR. MCCRACKEN: It wasn't competitive, but it was really – it was good. I mean, it was good to be among the artists of that caliber and that type and so forth. At the same time, as I maybe mentioned or kind of alluded to, I thought that I was interacting as much or more with New York artists as with L.A. artists.

MS. RICHARDS: Long distance?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, yeah, except, you know, the light and space and blah, blah, blah that you do find in L.A., and I found myself looking at car finishes to see how they did it, as a kind of reference and so forth; so there was some involvement in L.A. but more in an international –

MS. RICHARDS: So you felt as much of a kinship or a connection to the New York Minimalists as you did to the Southern California artists?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, yeah, yeah, New York work in general, yeah.

Excuse me, I just –

MS. RICHARDS: Sure.

MR. MCCRACKEN: My eyes are watering a little bit.

MS. RICHARDS: When you were in L.A., you mentioned quite a few artists. Were there any particular people you hung out with a lot, that you were close to? Did you really –

MR. MCCRACKEN: Were there? Maybe not. I mean, I saw people. Oh, Turrell was there, too – [James] Jim Turrell. No, not too much. I mean, I would see various of these people –

MS. RICHARDS: Did you know the painter John McLaughlin, the Minimalist abstract –

MR. MCCRACKEN: Oh, of course, I knew of him, and I met him later on. Where did I live then? [Inaudible] – I lived – anyway, I had dinner with him once, with him and with – who's that actor with that kind of notable voice? I can't remember. He was the one – was he the one that took us – we had dinner with him? Anyway, I did meet him and so forth, which was nice. It was interesting, the conversation between artists. That was fun.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you know [Frederick] Fred Hammersley?

MR. MCCRACKEN: No, I didn't. I knew his work. And earlier, before I was doing very much, I restored one of his paintings a little bit – [laughs] – just touched it up. But, anyway, most of those people I did know about but didn't meet them all, of course.

MS. RICHARDS: And what about Wallace Berman? Did you meet him?

MR. MCCRACKEN: I forget if I ever met him or not. Of course, I knew his work. I think I must have met him, at least later on, too. And also [Ed] Kienholz – John [sic] Kienholz, and Lynn Foulkes and a whole bunch of people there.

MS. RICHARDS: Was there – what was the social scene focused on? In New York it was this bar or that bar. In L.A., if you want to hang out with other artists, where did you go? Where would you have gone?

MR. MCCRACKEN: I didn't often go to bars there or hangouts, it seemed like. There kind of weren't any. You'd just sort of visit each other, as I remember, you know, at each other's studios and that kind of thing. I can't think of particular hangouts, even though I think there were a few, but there weren't any that I can remember hanging out in. There certainly are in New York, places I can remember hanging out in, but not in L.A.

[END CARD 1.]

MS. RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards interviewing John McCracken on April 19, 2010, for the Archives of American Art in New York City, Smithsonian Institution, disc two.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Okay, I'll try to erase everything I just said in my mind. You were asking about the –

MS. RICHARDS: The evolution of your thinking –

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: – that you arrived at, the plank.

MR. MCCRACKEN: – the planks, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MR. MCCRACKEN: They were – they turned out to be something even more minimal, I felt at the time, and yet even – and yet kind of risky or daring. But I had made a number of architectural things – a few architectural things and a number of almost, like, architectural elements, I suppose, some of the later ones, like stones or something like that – rectangular forms and quite minimal and all that.

And I started wondering at the time what I could make that was more minimal or, you know, next step. I kind of wanted to – wanted to get as minimal as I could.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you have a sense of consciously wanting to break new ground artistically?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, and it was kind of in a reduced, minimal area. I wanted to make something as simple as possible and have it still retain or have – being an interest and so forth – you know, not dumb but smart, so to speak, or with being.

And one evening I was in my studio looking at my work and just thinking about that. And I looked over at the wall, and there were a bunch of pieces of various-sized plywood pieces leaning against the wall. And I just thought, well, I guess that's it. [Laughs.] There it is right there. And yet I kind of like – what do you mean?

But I went ahead anyway and did that, and made even a couple of sheetlike things that were pieces of plywood, finished with the color, and then constructed things with various proportions and heights and so forth, and thicknesses, and all that sort of thing.

MS. RICHARDS: What were the issues that you thought about to come to the right proportion, the right width, the right thickness, the right height? What were the thoughts that dictated, in a way, the proportions?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Well, no, that was intuitive again, and yet also employed human scale and so forth, too, like a plank might have roughly the proportions of a human and yet has to be taller than a human. Otherwise, it's not as tall as a human, or that tall, or as – [inaudible] – or something, and so heavy – taller, and such that it would retain itself and have being in space. That's the kind of – you know, as a sculpture.

Like, if you make something that's way too big, then it's kind of a giant. And that can exist. It depends on where you put it and everything. And even miniature, and that can exist, too, but generally it was big enough to be in a space with humans, usually, like in a gallery or wherever the piece is shown, and be in the same world and interact successfully in that world, not be shocking or not be too bloated and that kind of thing, even though I played with all kinds of proportions, and you can.

I mean, heck, you know, humans are that way, too. Some are huge, and some are little and so on and so forth.

MS. RICHARDS: But did you have a sense – maybe it evolved intuitively, but afterward thinking, okay, if it's too wide, it's going to look like a door –

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: – and if it's too thick, it's going to look like it should stand and not lean.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, exactly, exactly. Yeah, these did have to lean. And I made a few that were kind of borderline in that way, but I got away with it. It was okay, although if you go too far, then you go and get into a – I forget what you call it, but where you're not quite sure: is it supposed to stay in, or is it supposed to leave – that kind of thing. So I try to make it more definite.

And I also tried not to lean a piece too much, and then the emphasis is on leaning. So if you sort of slide it in and just have it leaning somewhat casually, then the piece gets to show up and not be making another point, which is a little bit similar to titles. You can have titles that are so distracting, you think about the title rather than the piece. I didn't want to do that.

MS. RICHARDS: When you were thinking about this simple form, did it connect at any point in your mind with the simple form that Minimalists like Carl Andre, using bricks –

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: You thought that would be a dialogue.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, I thought it would be really good, yeah. In fact, there was that show in '67 – what's it called, "Art" something or – at the Jewish Museum [New York, NY]?

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, "Primary Structures: [Younger American and British Sculptors," 1966].

MR. MCCRACKEN: "Primary Structures."

MS. RICHARDS: That was '66.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Oh, I was thinking it was. Okay, anyway, I thought that Carl Andre's brick form there, that just went right across the floor with a row of bricks, was the strongest piece in the whole show. I really liked it because it was just totally simple and had

been – just made it, just did it. And my work was in the show, too. [Laughs.] I had some slotted pieces in there, but I thought his was the strongest one in the whole show. I liked his work.

MS. RICHARDS: How did you come to be in that show?

MR. MCCRACKEN: I don't know.

MS. RICHARDS: How did the curator – that was Kynaston McShine. How did the curator end up seeing your work?

MR. MCCRACKEN: I don't know. That was –

MS. RICHARDS: Had you already had the show at Elkon? I know you had a show there in '66, but it might have been that he saw it at Nick Wilder's.

MR. MCCRACKEN: It could be. You know, that's a good question, and I don't really know it, because it seems to me I showed with Elkon in '67. Maybe, was it – I mean, there was stuff I didn't show with those slotted pieces. I showed later ones.

MS. RICHARDS: Well, you actually had a show in '66 at Elkon –

MR. MCCRACKEN: Oh, I did. Okay. Okay.

MS. RICHARDS: – but it might have been after "Primary Structures."

MR. MCCRACKEN: Well, I don't know. I met Claes Oldenburg there at that show, and he said – he said, "I don't know why I'm not in this show. I'm a Minimal artist." Minimalist art, it's still a bit hard to define. I always thought that Jackson Pollack was a Minimal artist because he did just what was necessary to do. And even though it's complicated, it's still minimal. So I like his work, too.

MS. RICHARDS: We were talking about the size of the plank and the issues. You also – when you started doing Blocks, which was not too long afterward, how did you think about those forms and what their size and proportion and scale – how would you decide what their dimensions should be to create that sense of presence that you were after?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Pretty much the same as I've described, things that somehow you can contrive to have being. I would try to avoid things, though, too, like the sizes of other things. And I pretty much avoided cubes. I did make two cubes later on, but I felt they were too neutral or something – excuse me – of the sizes of what –

Oh, here's a good example. At the opening of the Whitney Museum [of American Art, New York, NY], whenever that was, one of my large, two-part block pieces was in the show. And someone told me that they saw two ladies sitting on it. So I thought, oh, it's my fault, really, because what I did was I made that about the height of a seat – a little bit high but where you could sit on it. Another piece somewhere in London or – I forgot where it was – was high enough to be a bar, and it got used to set glasses on.

So I tried to avoid things like that, because then you have distractions, really. You don't have the piece managing to fully be itself. You have it kind of suggesting other things.

MS. RICHARDS: At that point, in '66, you had already come to – you had already found the method that you used for quite a few years, the plywood and the fiberglass. Could you describe how you arrived at that system of construction, and technically what you were looking for, and why that worked, and actually what the system was, and how you would make a piece?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Macro's [ph] colors seemed to work. It was physical, and you could just put it on and do it. I kind of picked some of that up from Tony Delap, because he was making things that were a little bit industrial-looking at the time and using lacquer. And, in fact, I even helped him make some of those things. It's something you've got to love. You know, I got a little acquainted with lacquer.

But the first things I made were lacquer just on plywood with nothing else except those two things. And they would kind of – the cracks – plywood joints and so forth would kind of show through in time. And then I realized I have to do something else, so I started fiberglassing the forms before I painted them, and I'd paint them. And then –

MS. RICHARDS: And, at that point, when you painted them, that was many, many layers?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, yeah, quite a few. Yeah, 20 – I don't know. And I think a few of them, I started polishing them, too. For some time, I wasn't polishing them. I was just making them so they would come out high gloss but not totally mirror, that kind of thing.

And at some point – let's see, at some point I realized I was having – what I wanted was to do ever-flatter surfaces, even smoother and so forth, so then when I would fiberglass, or after fiberglassing, I started pouring resin onto the surfaces. I think, right away, I did it with poured resin, so that I was using resin instead of lacquer.

MS. RICHARDS: But you must have had to construct quite a system to keep it from dripping down the sides.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: I mean, you had to have every surface perfectly –

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, yeah. I just put a – make the piece real level, put a little piece of masking tape around it and measure how big that is, and then translate that into – you know, translate it an eighth of an inch or so into the cups or corks or whatever and pour it, and then pour all the same way, and then sand them and polish them. That's what I started doing.

MS. RICHARDS: So you would keep progressing around the whole piece with this masking tape, which would leave a mark when it came off, but then that would be covered by sanding.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Well, it would be covered by the next day with resin and so forth. So once in a while, you could just see a little remnant of where the joints of the resin were, but usually it was not distracting.

MS. RICHARDS: And you maintained that system –

MR. MCCRACKEN: I've used that ever since.

MS. RICHARDS: Ever since, with some detours here and there.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah. Going back to –

MR. MCCRACKEN: Later I – not too long ago, I again used lacquer, too, on top of – [inaudible] – which still gives me the flat surface but it gives me the added capabilities of lacquer; like if I wanted to – like what I did want to do is to use metallic lacquers, and you can't use metallic in resin, so I used lacquer on top and got metallics.

MS. RICHARDS: So I'm sorry, where does the resin fit in? You've got the plywood; you've got the fiberglass.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Fiberglass is a glass cloth in resin – polyester resin. So it's just using more of the polyester resin but also putting pigments into the resin.

MS. RICHARDS: I see.

MR. MCCRACKEN: And then you get a colored resin.

MS. RICHARDS: Was it dangerous using fiberglass?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Oh, yeah, it's toxic, but again, I used exhaust fans and rubber gloves and masks and everything.

MS. RICHARDS: Good.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Later I started using full-body suits and face masks, like that, and so forth, just to be extra safe.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah. When you were – you went to the opening of "Primary Structures"?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: When you saw that show, had you known of the work of the artists in that show, most of them or all of them?

MR. MCCRACKEN: No, I don't think I had. I don't think I knew who was in the show. Somebody might have told me but -

MS. RICHARDS: No, I mean, when you went there and saw all the work -

[Cross talk.]

- were you aware of the work of those artists, or were there some surprises?

MR. MCCRACKEN: No, there were surprises. I don't think I knew who was in the show, because I remember I didn't remember, didn't know. Somebody must have told me, and so probably I did know to some extent what work was in the show, but seeing it was like seeing it for the first time.

MS. RICHARDS: So at the same time, the same year, 1966, that that show happened, you had a show at Elkon, which you said your other dealer helped arrange -

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: - and you came to New York for that.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: How did you feel about that show and seeing your work in New York?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Oh, it was great. It was romantic almost.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you have the slabs in that show?

MR. MCCRACKEN: By that you mean blocks? Well, I had large blocks in the first show, and maybe some I did call slabs, I think, actually, because they were kind of upright and maybe a couple of -

MS. RICHARDS: Columns?

MR. MCCRACKEN: No -

MS. RICHARDS: Blocks?

MR. MCCRACKEN: - but not unlike columns but not as tall as columns, really. They were more like slabs, really, like maybe a two-part, where one's stacked on another and standing, and then others were more blocks, most of them large - I mean, large enough - I don't think anything was on pedestals. It was all -

MS. RICHARDS: How did that show do? Do you recall if the work sold?

MR. MCCRACKEN: No; I know it sold, but I don't know how much and what -

MS. RICHARDS: So you didn't have to take it back to California?

MR. MCCRACKEN: No, no. [They laugh.]

MS. RICHARDS: Excellent.

MR. MCCRACKEN: It was all shipped there, too.

MS. RICHARDS: At some point, I think it was around '66, you started making your works one color. We talked about, before, that they were two or even maybe three colors and -

[Cross talk.]

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, and also more than one part. There were several color ones where each part was one color -

MS. RICHARDS: Yes. Yeah.

MR. MCCRACKEN: - rather than two colors on -

[Cross talk.]

MS. RICHARDS: So what was your thinking in the process of reducing the pieces to one part and one color?

MR. MCCRACKEN: I don't know, just more reduction, I think. I continue doing sketches, of course, and some of them had more than one part and more than one color, so I wasn't – well, I was kind of stuck fast on doing pieces of one color. I just wanted to come down to it and have it be there, like that, rather than – rather than complicating anything.

I didn't want to build back up and make things less minimal after I made them as minimal as I could. I still tend to do that. I still tend to make things out of a single color and so forth, although with the resin and with the lacquer finishes, too, of course, you often have situations where a piece will be installed someplace and – or just you'd be looking at it, and if you're not familiar with it, you might think, well, is this side the same color? Is that side, or not? And sometimes you really can't tell.

Of course, I know, so I don't think so much that way, but if I think about it, I think, boy, that sure is, actually, a different color. So there's that variation that can happen, that's – I guess you could call it an illusion, but it's light and physicality and all that.

MS. RICHARDS: You also then, in that year, switched to teaching at UCLA. How did that come about?

MR. MCCRACKEN: I can't remember. I just got offered a job there. I guess that was right after – was that after Irvine? I guess it was. So I taught there for a couple of years. I can't remember how it came about, though; it just did. I guess they asked me to.

MS. RICHARDS: And at that point you moved to Venice?

MR. MCCRACKEN: I guess so. I must have, yeah, because – yeah, I did. Or maybe I even lived in Venice first. I'm not sure. Because actually, I told you, I remember some long commutes to Irvine, so I must have moved to Venice and then still taught for a while at Irvine and then started teaching at UCLA.

MS. RICHARDS: We touched on the sketchbook that was recently published that you worked on. I think it was '64 to '68. When you – sorry, I want to go back to that. Now, when you worked on that sketchbook, it looked like you explored variations on a form, and you were working through ideas, and that was a very free process.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Is it true, then, that afterwards, you'd go back to the sketchbook and decide which forms you would want to actually make?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: And would you decide in advance, 10 forms to make, three forms, one at a time?

MR. MCCRACKEN: I don't know, actually, probably kind of one at a time or two at a time or three or whatever. But, as I say, I didn't always make them.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you think that you were working in series – I mean, that was something that other Minimalist artists did – or did you feel that each piece was unique and individual, and it wasn't –

MR. MCCRACKEN: Maybe some of both, because I did tend to work in series of things. Most of those things I went back and checkmarked to make, I didn't make, or maybe just used them as mental material, too – because sometimes maybe I'd make something else that, in a sidelong way, came out of an earlier thought.

You see all that stuff going on and had gone on in your mind and so forth, and maybe other things will come out of that. That was maybe part of it, too, but nothing too logical or methodical or anything.

MS. RICHARDS: You were also writing in the sketchbook at the –

MR. MCCRACKEN: Oh, yeah, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: And did you have the feeling that this sketchbook was always going to be private, or did you think that you were making a sketchbook that you would be showing to friends, and, in fact, end up publishing one day?

MR. MCCRACKEN: It never occurred to me it might be published, but I never thought, this is private and nobody should see it or anything like that. So it was kind of both.

MS. RICHARDS: It could be exhibited, in fact, then.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah. Well, although -

MS. RICHARDS: It was very neat. [They laugh.]

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, I never thought about exhibiting it either.

MS. RICHARDS: You were familiar with other artists' sketchbooks and history that you might have seen in exhibitions?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah. Yeah, it seemed like I must have thought it, but I don't remember thinking about that. It was just useful as a, as I say, a kind of physical memory, and just seemed to work that way.

MS. RICHARDS: When you had the show in - when you had work in "Primary Structures," and you had a show at Robert Elkon and then another one, but you were living in L.A., did you start having the feeling that you should move to New York?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, yeah, and -

MS. RICHARDS: Why?

MR. MCCRACKEN: - sometimes I did, because I just thought, well, I should be there if I can.

MS. RICHARDS: Why?

MR. MCCRACKEN: It just seemed like I should. And I was trying to think; a friend of mine there in New York - what was his name? He said, "Everybody has to live in New York." He said, "You have to." I mean, he didn't really -

MS. RICHARDS: In terms of your -

MR. MCCRACKEN: He admonished me to do it, but he just thought that -

MS. RICHARDS: In terms of your career?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, right, right, career, and your art and your ideas and your mind and everything, just to be actually there. So I did move there -

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah, I noticed -

MR. MCCRACKEN: - I mean, at some point. I forget when -

MS. RICHARDS: - that you, in fact, had a teaching job at SVA [School of Visual Arts, New York, NY] -

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: - in '68.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, yeah. And then after that -

MS. RICHARDS: So when you came to New York, you don't remember who induced you to do that mostly?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Well, it was me that induced myself to do it -

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah, yeah.

MR. MCCRACKEN: - but I just remember that one little statement that guy made. And, you know, not that that was pivotal or anything, but I had that feeling, too, that New York was the place to go next. I had gone to L.A. already, and in a similar way, I've got to go there to be more in an actual art world that is, you know, the kind I want to be in.

MS. RICHARDS: To be in a dialogue with people who could understand what you were -

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, yeah. They wanted to go to New York and be there for a while and meet more New York artists also.

MS. RICHARDS: Where did you - so you decided to move. Had you met your wife by then?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Gail, you mean?

MS. RICHARDS: Or were you married previously?

MR. MCCRACKEN: No, actually I was married earlier.

MS. RICHARDS: Who was that you were married to?

MR. MCCRACKEN: To a woman I'd met in school, I guess. You know, Joan Stout was her name then. She changed it, though, later. I had two boys with her.

MS. RICHARDS: Wow. What are their names?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Patrick and David.

MS. RICHARDS: Stout?

MR. MCCRACKEN: No.

MS. RICHARDS: No, no, McCracken. Sorry. But by the time you went to New York, you had – you weren't together anymore.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Right, right, right. I didn't meet Gail until '82, I think.

MS. RICHARDS: So you went on your own to New York.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Where did you first live?

MR. MCCRACKEN: In a loft – which one was that? I lived in two lofts there. Which one did I live in first anyway? Because I lived in one on – it was East 20th [Street], I think. That must have been the first one, I think, because that was close to Max's Kansas City [bar/nightclub], where I hung out a lot.

Oh, Neil Williams was that guy that mentioned that thing to me. And of course I met a whole lot of artists there in New York.

MS. RICHARDS: So the first place you lived – and you lived and worked in the same place?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Was that in the East 20s?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, it was just right off of – just a couple of blocks, kind of, from Max's – just on the East Side, I think. I forget the streets. Was it right near 5th [Avenue]? I'm not sure. No, it wasn't. Or it was; I don't know. But then the next place I lived was on Grand Street in SoHo.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you remember the number?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Sixty Grand, I think it was. I don't know. I think that's where it was.

MS. RICHARDS: So that's near Lafayette [Square]?

MR. MCCRACKEN: I'm not sure what it's near now anymore. I remember –

MS. RICHARDS: How did you get that place? Was it a sublet?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah. Yeah. Both of them were. Both of them were just one-year things.

[Cross talk.]

MS. RICHARDS: – who you got that from?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Huh?

MS. RICHARDS: Who you got the Grand Street –

MR. MCCRACKEN: I don't remember. Oh, no, I do remember. It was Joseph Kosuth.

MS. RICHARDS: How did you meet him?

MR. MCCRACKEN: I don't know; maybe because he showed at the same time in Paris I did. I think maybe I might have met him there. I remember it was there I might have met him. We showed at the same time. I think that was the case.

The guy I bought the other loft from, the first one, was – oh, it was an L.A. artist, makes those things, those Plexiglas kind of –

MS. RICHARDS: Kauffman?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Kauffman, yeah – Craig Kauffman.

MS. RICHARDS: He was in New York?

MR. MCCRACKEN: I don't know, or else L.A. I think he was still in L.A. Somehow –

MS. RICHARDS: But he had that –

MR. MCCRACKEN: – where he had that place he was going to use later on.

MS. RICHARDS: So when you got to New York, did you intend that this is where you're moving; you're going to stay here?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Not, necessarily. I just moved here and –

MS. RICHARDS: – tried it.

MR. MCCRACKEN: I did find it pretty distracting, because there's a party a minute here, and things were, of course, quite different when you have to carry plywood up five flights of stairs with no elevator and that sort of thing. I don't think I ever really got to work here – got to working here in as sure of a way and as, kind of, organized a way as I had in L.A.

MS. RICHARDS: You did complete quite a bit of work while you were here.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, yeah, yeah. I managed to do some anyway, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: But you had to carry it up and down five flights.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: The Grand Street is – you were also on the fifth floor?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Either fourth or fifth. I'm not sure what it was.

MS. RICHARDS: And the elevator –

MR. MCCRACKEN: Maybe there could have been an elevator there even, but who knows? It's just all different. You know, you have to have things delivered and blah, blah, blah – different going to hardware stores, different going to art stores and different – everything is different.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MR. MCCRACKEN: But I found it interesting and exhilarating, kind of, to be in New York.

MS. RICHARDS: How did you get the SVA teaching job? Do you remember who referred you to that?

MR. MCCRACKEN: No. I don't know who – did I apply? I don't know.

MS. RICHARDS: What were you teaching?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Art. I mean –

MS. RICHARDS: Painting, sculpture?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Both, actually – painting, sculpture, kind of even throwing ideas in, too – same at Hunter [College of the City University of New York].

MS. RICHARDS: Early years of SVA.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you stay in New York? I know you taught at -

MR. MCCRACKEN: Hunter.

MS. RICHARDS: - SVA and then at Hunter. Maybe there was some gap in between; I'm not sure.

MR. MCCRACKEN: A little one.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you stay throughout that entire period, from '68, I think, to -

MR. MCCRACKEN: I don't think so. It seems to me I stayed -

MS. RICHARDS: - '72?

MR. MCCRACKEN: I'm also remembering drawing - [inaudible] - for the first year of teaching at SVA. Then I might have gone back to L.A., because I still have studio there, and then come back here for Hunter. I might have done that.

MS. RICHARDS: So you were on Grand Street when you taught at Hunter?

MR. MCCRACKEN: I think so. I think so.

MS. RICHARDS: So it was the 20s in the first teaching stint -

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: - and Grand Street second?

[Cross talk.]

So did you succeed in meeting the artists that you wanted to meet?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Pretty much. I met lots of them, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Were there any particular ones who you became close to?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Not particularly. I mean, I got to know Dan Flavin fairly well and Judd somewhat well and Andre somewhat well.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you exchange studio visits, or did you just -

[Cross talk.]

- have Max's?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Mostly Max's, I guess. [Laughs.] Well, a few studio visits. I can't really remember who. I remember [Richard] Dick Bellamy coming to my studio one time, but I can't remember artists -

MS. RICHARDS: Did you think about wanting to show at his gallery, Dick Bellamy [Green Gallery, 1960-65, Oil & Steel Gallery, 1980-98]?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Oh, it crossed my mind, sure, but it wasn't something I was pushing for or anything.

MS. RICHARDS: Were there older artists who live in New York -

MR. MCCRACKEN: Oh, there was Barney Newman. I did meet him.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you meet him?

MR. MCCRACKEN: I guess he's - is he maybe the only one? I might have met a few others.

MS. RICHARDS: [Mark] Rothko?

MR. MCCRACKEN: I don't think I met him, no.

MS. RICHARDS: Clyfford Still?

MR. MCCRACKEN: No, I didn't meet those people, or [Willem] de Kooning or whoever.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Mostly just Barney.

MS. RICHARDS: Was it basically a struggle with the – that you said the challenges of doing work in a situation like New York versus L.A., or did you find it invigorating and exciting and you enjoyed being here?

MR. MCCRACKEN: It was actually both – both. By the time I'd been here for those two years, I kind of decided, well, this isn't quite working as well as I want it to; so then that's when I went off to Nevada to teach for a while.

MS. RICHARDS: Why Nevada?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Well, it's just like really totally opposite. I don't know. [Laughs.] And that was fun for a while, though pretty odd. It was in Reno, or near – in Reno, I guess. But it was a way of just doing something opposite for a little while, and it worked okay.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you feel that your work needed a jolt of something opposite?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Maybe, because I was somewhat confused about my work for quite a while. During that entire period I didn't quite know what I might do or, kind of, how I was going to keep working.

MS. RICHARDS: It seemed like, starting in about 1970, you went through various experiments. You did a series of work – that's how I would term it –

MR. MCCRACKEN: Okay.

MS. RICHARDS: – something called the Berkeley Series, where you were painting where the knots of the wood would show through –

MR. MCCRACKEN: Oh, yeah, I made those.

MS. RICHARDS: And then you did a piece with diagonal slats, with the diagonal slats.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: So that was a departure, and it looked like you were – I don't know if you were excited to be experimenting or in a confused state of –

MR. MCCRACKEN: Both. Both. I don't know why those got called the Berkeley Series either. I never did know. But, anyway –

MS. RICHARDS: You named it, or did somebody else name it?

MR. MCCRACKEN: No, I didn't. Somebody else did.

MS. RICHARDS: Ah.

MR. MCCRACKEN: I remember naming it. I just blurted something out without knowing it, but I wouldn't have named them that particular – I don't know. Anyway, they were –

MS. RICHARDS: Can you change that at this point?

MR. MCCRACKEN: No. [They laugh.] I chose not to.

MS. RICHARDS: But why did you do that series? That seems so unusual.

MR. MCCRACKEN: I don't know. Well, I was trying to kind of change from the lacquer or the resin thing.

MS. RICHARDS: You mean, that's a change from that finish, that very solid –

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, and in a way, it was changing to – or attempting to change maybe to something a little more New Yorky, possibly, a little more raw and boring, you know, than from the polished surfaces and so forth.

MS. RICHARDS: Less about beauty?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah. Yeah, a little bit. Yeah. So I made a number of pieces that were built – just built of slats or boards, you know, and stained or painted. Some were painted. So it's over kind of actually –

[Cross talk.]

MS. RICHARDS: How did you feel about that work once you'd made it?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Oh, kind of okay but not hugely satisfied. So I did eventually go back to the -

MS. RICHARDS: Did you show that body of work?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Let's see, did I? Yeah, I did. I showed those so-called Berkeley pieces at Ace Gallery, at that time in Toronto [Canada], I think it was. Maybe that's the only time I had a show of just those pieces.

MS. RICHARDS: Have you -

MR. MCCRACKEN: - -made anymore? Nope.

MS. RICHARDS: No. Did you try to extract them from public view if you didn't think they were successful -

MR. MCCRACKEN: No, no.

MS. RICHARDS: - or just, once they were done, they were done?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, yeah, I kind of intended to do that. Once pieces are done, they kind of live by themselves. They live their own lives, so let them do it. And also, I always had the attitude that I don't necessarily know what I've done. You know, other people say, "What's that? I don't understand it." Sometimes I say, "Well, I don't either, at least not yet."

In that sense, I kind of trust my intuition to have done something okay, even if I don't know it. You know - [inaudible]. So I tended to be that way about the pieces.

MS. RICHARDS: At the same time, you still did planks. I see you did one that was called *New York One Gold* [date?]. I don't know what -

MR. MCCRACKEN: I can't remember which one that is now. Usually I remember them.

MS. RICHARDS: And *New York Two White* [date?]. Those are just random pieces.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: You could have done any number of -

MR. MCCRACKEN: Do you think they were planks, though?

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah, the dimensions - well, 96 by 22 by three [inches], approximately.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, those are planks.

MS. RICHARDS: So wide - a wide-person plank.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah, but then -

MR. MCCRACKEN: Although those might have - wait, 96 [inches]? Those might have been some that I showed at Sonnabend in - whenever it was.

MS. RICHARDS: That was in '69.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Sixty-nine or '70.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Okay. Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Then there was another body of work that was quite unique, where you used a mandala form.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: It was very complex -

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: - basically a painting -

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, paintings, yes.

MS. RICHARDS: - made with what material?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Oil paint.

MS. RICHARDS: Oil paint. What were you thinking about when you decided to launch into that group of work?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Kind of psychological things and mystical things. I mentioned I read a lot of Jung, and Jung talks a lot about mandalas and what they show, what they reveal, what they mean and blah, blah, blah, and, you know, there are mandalas all over the world, here and there, and I just got interested in them and did some. Some were shown, I believe, at Elkon.

MS. RICHARDS: It didn't mean that you were having a crisis of faith with your other pieces?

MR. MCCRACKEN: No.

MS. RICHARDS: It was something that you felt -

[Cross talk.]

- you would just pause doing other pieces, do these -

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: - and then maybe go back.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah. Yeah, but some of that back and forth, doing this, doing that and doing that and so forth, one could call confusion or indecisiveness, and there was a certain degree of that. And also, you know what? I never did - I never did understand the planks. For a long time they really puzzled me, and I just didn't understand them.

And even though I say I don't have to understand things, there was still kind of a bother there that I didn't understand quite enough. And so I would try to branch off and do other things. But they persisted and -

MS. RICHARDS: Yes, and meanwhile, while you weren't quite sure about them, it seemed that, critically, they were applauded -

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: - from the get-go.

MR. MCCRACKEN: I guess so, yeah, because of -

[Cross talk.]

MS. RICHARDS: Did you get feedback from other artists about how they felt - what they felt about the planks?

MR. MCCRACKEN: I don't know. I guess so. I can't remember specifically, but I guess so, because I was doing them, and they were seen and so forth.

MS. RICHARDS: But they maintained their mystery -

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: - a kind of detachment.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, and even to me, too. [Laughs.] It kind of bugs me, but - but in a way that's good, too, and I don't - I didn't feel myself resenting it, exactly, but it's kind of funny thinking that you're more past your own realized thoughts than you thought you might have or might be.

But I did think - once I did think, too, like, actually these are kind of interesting forms, because they're rectangular and so forth, like the human world, and it's largely - you know, the human material world, anyway, is largely rectangular and so forth.

But they lean against the wall and make that angle, which means they kind of screw a space up a little bit, or mess it up, or differentiate from it, and probably distinguish themselves by being like other things and not like other things, and doing things like touching just on two points, and then the rest of it with the polished surfaces and so forth, getting them a degree of being there and not being there and that sort of thing.

So I ended up appreciating them a little more than I did for some time, I think, thinking things like that.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you particularly like the fact that they were quasi-paintings, quasi-sculpture?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Not so much, although I can't quite say that, because I almost thought of them as being like strokes of color in space, just like a brushstroke, like that. So I did -

MS. RICHARDS: There's the Barnett Newman, huh?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, I guess so. But I never quite - I didn't quite think I was doing something that was aesthetically or kind of philosophic or whatever between painting and sculpture, even though I was. I mean, there are painting thicknesses, in a way, and so there is that whole business, and however you can kind of grapple with it.

MS. RICHARDS: After you, or at the same time as you were doing the slabs, you were doing blocks -

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: - and columns, and later other forms. But were the blocks and the columns more comprehensible than those slabs to you? Were they more comfortable, in a sense?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Maybe a little bit, but actually, in the end, not much. Probably not much, although maybe so, maybe so. The planks are a little more puzzling and kind of active in odd ways, the angle and all that sort of thing.

MS. RICHARDS: You talked about how they activate the space.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: - and they certainly stand out from everything else.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah. Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: They're not of this world; they're not of that world.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, yeah, or they are of this world, and they're not of this world, about the same. I like that kind of thing, things that - I like things that exist and don't - or seem to exist, or do exist and seem not to, or seem to be of this world but also seem maybe to be of some other world, too, at the same time. Then, to me, a work has breadth and so forth.

Like if you make something that's overbearingly physical, it can seem to be only here and nowhere else. And I can't think of any examples, but it's just a thought, maybe. Or if something is real flighty and otherworldly, it can seem to be only there and not here. So I like to try to make things that are in both spheres.

MS. RICHARDS: You talked about the focus on geometric and on primary colors, which - at first as connecting your works to an abstract plane, kind of a -

MR. MCCRACKEN: Oh, yeah, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: But gradually you started going beyond the primary colors to the secondary colors and to pastels.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: How did that release happen? Did you - was it just pure experimentation -

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: - or did you have a conceptual plan, strategy, idea that, okay, I've done these primaries; now I want - now I have the rationale for going beyond those?

MR. MCCRACKEN: I guess - excuse me - something like that maybe, because those first things were mostly red and blue, which still are kind of my favorite colors.

MS. RICHARDS: And yellow and black.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah – oh, excuse me – but mainly red and blue, mostly because they're just so, I don't know, pure or something. But in the, whenever it was, the '60s now, I did – you know, the first plank I made was red or blue and – one was blue; one was red. But then I started doing pastel things.

And what I was doing then was looking at *Vogue* magazine and [*Harper's Bazaar* and so forth, and I got –

MS. RICHARDS: Was that when you were in Paris?

MR. MCCRACKEN: No, actually it wasn't. It was before then – before then – and just checking out colors and titles; like one of them was "Live it Up in Lilac" [1967]. [Laughs.] And I don't know why I was doing that but, you know, the '60s were the '60s, or whatever that was.

But I don't really know quite why they went to – even things that were associational like that, it seems a little strange to me. I remember Dan Flavin – no, not Flavin but rather – was it him? No, it was Mondrian said something about not using green because it was too much like nature. And so that was something that I tried to do, too, and yet –

MS. RICHARDS: You have avoided green mostly.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Pretty much, yeah. There have been some, but – and I think I can be abstract, too, but it just illustrates the kind of problem, or the idea, of not having associations that distract from the work. I don't know quite why I did all those pastel things, but I did.

MS. RICHARDS: So that particular time, you gave those pieces those unusual titles that refer to –

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: – lipsticks or fashion.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Right, right.

MS. RICHARDS: And then you went back to a more straightforward – blue.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, yeah. And, of course, a lot of things got – as with a number of artists, got called *Untitled*, and that doesn't ever seem good, so I even did rename a few things.

MS. RICHARDS: I was going to ask you about that, because in some early catalogues, the same piece is called one thing, and then later it was called another thing.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, yeah, probably it might reflect it, because I thought, well, you take a blue plank and call it *Untitled*, it just doesn't tell you anything about it. So I would call it *Blue Plank*. If I had not had a title for it that was different, I just called it a descriptive word.

And, as you might know, a number of the things, like those blocks from Oakland and so forth, were called things like that, that were descriptive, like *Violet Block in Two Parts* [1966] and that kind of thing. I ended up not quite liking that so much because it was so – really cold, and then I went to titles again.

MS. RICHARDS: Going back to the late '60s, when *2001: A Space Odyssey* [1968] came out – I know you've been asked about this millions of times, but I can't avoid it. That movie came out. You had already done the pieces you had done that were very similar to this –

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: – this object in the film.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: What went through your mind when you saw that, and –

MR. MCCRACKEN: I don't know –

MS. RICHARDS: – what kind of responses did you get from other people?

MR. MCCRACKEN: I appreciated the form. I didn't think much about it, but I appreciated it and wondered a little bit about it. Well, I did pick up a book, *The Making of 2001* [Jerome Agel. *The Making of Kubrick's 2001*. New York: New American Library, 1970] it was, and they described that at first they thought of using a pyramid, and

they realized – you know, they thought, after making up prototypes, that it wasn't strong enough. They had to have a column. And I was interested in that because it kind of jibed with my thoughts, too. I had made two pyramids, by the way.

But I have been asked a number of times, did I design the blah, blah, but no. But I suppose that whoever did design it might have seen my work or might have been somewhat influenced by my work.

MS. RICHARDS: It's never come up? You've never found that person –

[Cross talk.]

MR. MCCRACKEN: No, no, I never tried to. I just assumed whatever.

MS. RICHARDS: During the '60s when you were in L.A., the late '60s – of course, that's a famous period of time, with lots of turmoil, drugs, rock and roll, political protests – were you engaged in any of those things? Did they impact on your work?

MR. MCCRACKEN: I don't know if they impacted on my work very much, but I did – I did jump into some of that stuff. At the school I was going to, Arts and Crafts, that was – and for a time there were all those things also at UC Berkeley. It was the free speech movement or –

MS. RICHARDS: That was in '67 – I mean '65. That was '65.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Well, those – oops, excuse me. So there was something going on at Arts and Crafts also that I can't even quite remember clearly what it was about, but the way with a lot of things is you get a little bit mobbish – not mobbish but, you know, kind of heated and so forth.

But the president of the school ended up getting fired, and there were meetings and all that stuff. So there was some of that stuff going on, whatever it was, kind of quasi-political – not political but –

MS. RICHARDS: Did you feel that you were a little bit removed, being a little older than the others, from –

MR. MCCRACKEN: Not an awful lot, because there were a number of people who had been in the service and were a little older. So it was kind of – it was – most people were younger, though, I think, actually. It didn't seem to make an awful lot of difference.

MS. RICHARDS: But through the late '60s and all the cultural upheaval, even when you were in L.A., I'm just wondering if it impacted –

MR. MCCRACKEN: I don't think so, much. I don't think so. The thing that impacted me most at Arts and Crafts was going to the cafeteria and talking to people who would bring in other ideas and bring in other magazines and so forth, you know, and just – and it was one of the most educational spots in the school.

MS. RICHARDS: So going back ahead – that was just stepping back into the '60s again.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: So when you decided to leave New York, and you went to Nevada, and you started teaching there – I guess it was the University of Nevada in Reno?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Reno.

MS. RICHARDS: Reno – and you found a studio and a place to live, were there interesting faculty there? Were there other things that drew you there besides the landscape and the –

MR. MCCRACKEN: Not so much.

MS. RICHARDS: – lots of isolation?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Not so much, actually – a few nice people, good people who, most of them were artists and so forth, but nobody I was – you know, there wasn't much of a thing there, I mean, certainly like New York and Los Angeles and so forth.

MS. RICHARDS: But you were excited about being there?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, actually, just to be away for a while and –

MS. RICHARDS: Away from the art world.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Kind of, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: When you were in New York, did you feel like you were part of the art world?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Somewhat, sure. Yeah, and I've never felt apart from it, even in Reno, communications being what they are and all of that. But it was nice being in the woods and being where it's quiet, and I was just trying that out for a while.

And I liked it up to a point. Reno wasn't exhilarating, exactly. It was fine. But after that I taught for a while in Las Vegas [NV]. And I remember when I stepped off the plane in Las Vegas, I thought, wow, this space, you know, because it just goes *vroom*, like that -

MS. RICHARDS: The desert.

MR. MCCRACKEN: - really, really big and so forth, yeah. So that was more exciting in that sense, and less in others. I mean, living in a city full of casinos is kind of strange to do, but I ended up learning how to fly airplanes there, too, which was very exhilarating.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, is that where you learned?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, yeah. It was out in the desert, and it was a perfect place to learn to fly airplanes, because you get up in the air and look around, and it's just like a painting everywhere, you know, with the -

MS. RICHARDS: Was that a long-held wish that you wanted to -

MR. MCCRACKEN: No, no, it just kind of came about.

MS. RICHARDS: Have you maintained - do you have a license still?

MR. MCCRACKEN: I have a license but I haven't flown for a long time. For a while, with a partner, I owned a plane there.

MS. RICHARDS: What kind of plane?

MR. MCCRACKEN: It was a Citabria.

MS. RICHARDS: How do you spell that?

MR. MCCRACKEN: C-I-T-A-B-R-I-A. Let's see, is that right? Yeah. Citabria. It actually is aerobatic backwards, I think. But it's an aerobatic, cloth-covered airplane. You can fly it upside down and do other -

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, did you do that?

MR. MCCRACKEN: A little bit, yeah. I never learned how to do it thoroughly. I mostly just flew it. And actually, for a while I flew from Las Vegas - that's where I have my license and so forth - and I had gotten a teaching job in Santa Barbara [CA]. I flew it from there to Santa Barbara a couple of times a week and taught, which is kind of fun.

MS. RICHARDS: Wow.

MR. MCCRACKEN: The airport's great.

MS. RICHARDS: When you were in Nevada still, it seemed that you started doing - you were continuing to do the work that you had done before, but you also started doing works that would mainly be on the wall.

MR. MCCRACKEN: I did do a number of wall pieces.

MS. RICHARDS: Around that time, '72, '73.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you recall how that came about conceptually?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Not really; I just did a number of wall pieces. It didn't seem like -

MS. RICHARDS: But did you think of them as sculptures still, even though they were on the wall?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah. Yeah, although a number of them - or some of them - were done with poured resin,

and like all kinds of googly resin. And so, of course – so they became – well, they became kind of resin paintings. Some were resin paintings.

I've got to watch my time. Oh, I'm okay, I think. Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: So at a certain point you decided that you wanted to leave, and did you seek another position, or somebody from Santa Barbara [University of California, Santa Barbara] called you?

MR. MCCRACKEN: I don't remember, actually.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you know anyone in the department there in Santa Barbara?

MR. MCCRACKEN: No, although the girlfriend I'd had there in Las Vegas was from Santa Barbara, so probably that was the connection. I don't know how –

MS. RICHARDS: So the two of you went to Santa Barbara?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Well, I did. I can't remember whether she did or not. I don't think she did. She kind of lived in both places. I don't know how that came about, but it did.

MS. RICHARDS: Was that more of a permanent position, or was it also a temporary, adjunct kind of teaching job?

MR. MCCRACKEN: I guess it was a little more permanent. Oh, it was also part-time. I taught at the College of Creative Studies [of UC Santa Barbara], which was part-time and kind of advanced, so it was fun and free and so forth. I even branched out and did classes that I called "Psychic Traveling," and at some points had lecture classes that were like 300 people in them and that sort of thing. It was kind of fun and freewheeling, so it was interesting.

MS. RICHARDS: You enjoyed that?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, it was fun. Yeah. And also I taught sculpture and painting, you know, so it was both regular and irregular.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you live in Santa Barbara when you were working there?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, I – what did I do anyway? I lived there somewhere.

MS. RICHARDS: You said you commuted for a time from Las Vegas.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, for a while I commuted. Yeah, right, for a while I did commute, and then had a small place in Santa Barbara somewhere near the college.

MS. RICHARDS: And that was a place where you would work as well as live.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Well, no, I had a studio there. They gave me a studio, so I worked there and then lived nearby.

[END CARD 2.]

MS. RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards interviewing John McCracken in New York City on April 19, 2010, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc three.

John, I wanted to just step back for a second again to the late '60s and ask you about an interesting body of work you exhibited with Nicholas Wilder in '68. I think I saw an image of it, and it looked like it was – the gallery was filled with columns that almost reached the ceiling. They were all painted white or maybe different kinds of white. It was a departure. I wanted to ask you, what was that body of work about? What were you trying to do? And how did you feel it succeeded?

MR. MCCRACKEN: I am not sure how well I succeeded, but it was kind of an architectural move derived somewhat from my interest in Egyptian – what do you call them – temples. I remember that what they would do with temples was kind of use the columns themselves, the posts, to define the space. And somehow they just caught my mind, and so I made a bunch of columns that, to my intuitiveness, dealt with the space or just kind of defined it, you know, without crowding it too much or without being too small, too much.

And so I designed it to the space, each one, of course, one in L.A. and one in New York at almost the same time, or the same time. And –

MS. RICHARDS: At Elkon?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, yeah. It was the same, but, of course, it was designed differently because the space is different, not too close to the ceiling. And interestingly, too, that a person in that space could appear and disappear fairly easily. The openings, you couldn't tell if anybody was there or not. But it was kind of an architectural thing. And they were made of plywood painted just wall white, wall-paint white.

MS. RICHARDS: Matte?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, right, just to be neutral and to be pure form, just pure forms that somehow dealt with the space like I wanted them to.

MS. RICHARDS: Why did you want to do the same show in New York and L.A.?

MR. MCCRACKEN: I don't know. Just two galleries, two spaces. It was interesting to do that same thing in two different places.

MS. RICHARDS: Were you interested in the response of the visitors and the other artists and if it would vary between the two institutions?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Not so much, not so much. I am never even really sure what the responses were.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you make those to sell?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Oh, yeah, yeah, except – not necessarily. And I think they weren't, even though they could have been. But they were – I think they were thrown away afterward, eventually. One of the pieces was shown in Toronto, I think, at Art Gallery of Ontario. Is that where they were? I think one was shown, and that one was one of those pieces, so it had not been designed to a space, but rather I figured it would work in that space. So it was a thing. That often happens, too. You make a thing that you think is going to be at one place, and you put it somewhere else. It looks okay there, too. I think – [inaudible].

MS. RICHARDS: I wanted to ask you a question that comes from the sketchbook, but that applies later. You are working through forms in the sketchbook, but hardly any notations about color. And you have talked about that and the difference between those two basic elements of your work. Can you discuss that – how you went through your mind and created the forms and then – but the color was at a different point, and why?

MR. MCCRACKEN: I remember writing something like, color defines form. But I also remember thinking about, you make something, and in a way, you don't want to make anything, except you have to. If you want it to exist, you have to make something out of – you have to make a thing out of something. But that is just one little part of it.

The rest of it is that it turned out I liked the beauty of it and the definiteness of it and the abstractness also. Color is kind of abstract. I mean, it is abstract. And to make a sculpture out of color, you have something abstract right from the beginning, you know, because color, if you call it color – if you call it lacquer, it makes it more material. But that works, too. And like I make things out of steel, and that is okay, too. But there is a certain abstractness that comes from having the material seem to be color, because color is an abstract quality. It is not a thing. It is a quality. Do you know what I mean?

You know, your sweater is wool or whatever it is, and it is red. You don't quite tend to call it red. What is it made of? It is made of red. But in sculpture, maybe you could kind of see it that way a little bit. It is made of, you know – [inaudible] – or whatever it is. And then that kind of – it is just connected with the beauty and also what I tried to get and also the – you know, the variableness of polished surfaces and so forth. [Inaudible.]

MS. RICHARDS: You mentioned – somewhere I read – thinking about the shortcomings of colored sculpture you have seen and wanting to avoid the sense you are applying color to a form.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, yeah, because in that case, the number of sculptures have looked like they were first made, and then they were colored. And sometimes that kind of works, and often it doesn't, because the color then can – especially if it is a bunch of shapes and so forth applied to the form, which is made of other shapes. Who is that guy? Carel Visser Carel. He made a bunch of things that were kind of yellow. I thought those were pretty good because they weren't messed up with color. And some of [Tony] Smith's things seemed to have been colored afterward too much. I liked his stainless things, but not so much his colored things. So there is a balance in there trying to have the elements be unified.

Then Julian Schnabel did some paintings with plates on them. I ended up thinking those are pretty good, because you got the paint and so forth to kind of deal with those plates, and not have the plates pop off and stand there all by themselves, and get it all unified. Unity is a big idea in my mind as to what you want in art, whether it is painting or sculpture or anything, your unity and relatedness and so forth. The colored sculptures

sometimes look like two, three things put together. And they can look like that just form-wise, too, with different forms jammed together, or a painting could look like that with - [inaudible] - things in it, even though it is all flat and so forth.

MS. RICHARDS: So the most fundamental element of your work is the form.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, yeah, I think so.

MS. RICHARDS: Run through that. But the color, then, you determined after you had made the form in kind of an intuitive process that we had talked about a little bit earlier.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Sometimes. Usually the color would come second, but not always. Sometimes it would come first, or at the same time, like, I want to make a blue form or something.

MS. RICHARDS: And did you - and when you were making that, did you think, okay, now this is - I want to see what - I am going to make this one. Did you think about, let's say, three or four, five colors in advance? Okay, I want to see what these five pieces are going to look like in these five different colors together.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, sometimes.

MS. RICHARDS: So they weren't necessarily one at a time?

MR. MCCRACKEN: No, no, sometimes there might be a whole show. I remember, for the Sonnabend show, I made all the forms. I don't know how much thinking I had done about the colors, but then I mixed all the colors. I think I did it all simultaneously, so that the whole show would have an array of colors that I liked, that kind of thing, or, of course, if I had made a multicolor piece, which I have done a number of times, then I would make all the colors and work them all out, so that they are the right colors and also the right sequencing and that sort of thing.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you tend to set off on making a body of work for a show, or were you rather working in your studio one piece, then the next piece, without thinking about a show?

MR. MCCRACKEN: No, I tended to make whole shows pretty much each time. I think that is how all of them came about, actually. Painting just the group shows might be different, but I can't think of any shows that came about from having just worked in the studio for a while and then having - [inaudible].

MS. RICHARDS: And then pick?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, yeah. And at some point, I started designing shows, too, more, you know, thinking up the whole show, so that it fit in the gallery and looked okay. Because I remember in '89, I showed with [Galerie] Konrad Fischer in Dusseldorf [Germany]. I made a body of work, but I didn't think up how they might fit in the gallery. And it was really hard figuring out how they could fit. Fortunately, Konrad was kind of loose about it and said, "Don't worry. They are going to look fine." And they did. But that prompted me to work out a little more, you know, completely how they might all fit.

MS. RICHARDS: You have talked about the process of making these pieces, and they are all done by hand. They were, and they still are, I mean, except for the stainless steel. We talked about that. And you remarked at one point, I think, that if there were a possibility of having a machine do them for you, you would be happy to have someone else do them. It isn't a philosophical compulsion to do them yourself. It is just practical.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Could you describe the process of putting on the color, in the sense - I wondered if, when you decide, okay, what I am after is a blue, and how many layers of lacquer would you normally be putting on a piece?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Well, it depends. If it is lacquer, it is a whole bunch - unknown number of coats. But if it is resin, it is one.

MS. RICHARDS: Well, let's say lacquer. Once you mentioned 20 coats. Were you creating the color that you wanted through a series of coats of the same color? Or were you building up different colors that would end up visually combining to be the color you wanted?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, it is that way either with the lacquer or the resin, actually. Lacquer, of course, would be layers until you get it. And the resin would be different colors until you get it. Sometimes it would take me four hours to mix one color in resin because - a little bit of white, a little bit of this, and so forth, you know, just to get it just right. So there is a certain business there about doing it by hand, so to speak, in that sense, in a color

sense and even in the forming sense, too, because I know the pieces I make myself have my hand, kind of, there evident, you know, even though I use power tools, obviously, naturally, to form them.

So there is that, and that is kind of a – it is okay.

MS. RICHARDS: I guess what I am asking – I will rephrase this. Can you see one color through another color with the lacquers, so that if you are building up to a blue, but you are putting greens and purples, is that going to impact the final layer? Or, in fact, do you determine the color that you want after many hours, perhaps, and then you repeat that same color to build up the surface?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Repeat the same color? How do you mean?

MS. RICHARDS: Like if you are working with glazes and oil paint, you might –

MR. MCCRACKEN: Okay, it is the same with lacquer. They are transparent, so the color evolves.

MS. RICHARDS: So you are thinking about how multiple shades of a color or even complementary colors would be put on –

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: And through years of doing this, you can control what the final result will be.

MR. MCCRACKEN: More or less, but somewhat uncontrollable, too, which is fine. But the lacquers tend to be that way. They build up. Should it be a little more blue, a little more red? Some of the lacquers are really strange, too. There are some colors that are different depending on the angle of view. So I used to do those, too, strange automotive colors, blue and purple and red, all depending on what angle you look at. But most of them are – they are all transparently put on in order to build the color.

MS. RICHARDS: Can you control the level of glossiness, the level of reflectiveness?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, but I usually do as much of a faux-gloss mirror finish as possible, whether it is lacquer or resin or steel or whatever.

MS. RICHARDS: You were talking about the fact that you need to control this process and, in fact, do it by hand, because there isn't any way of – there isn't anybody else who can do it. Do you have an assistant who at least could help you build the plywood part of it?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Oh, yeah. I have done that a number of times. I have had someone build the plywood forms. I have done that for several years, a bunch of years. I have even had people help me in the studio, too, with sanding and polishing and all that for several years, not as many years as having them build things for me, but yeah, I have done that. And it is kind of – to me, it is kind of all the same. You are always doing it yourself, and someone else is holding the tool.

But in a way, you are holding it through them, you know, because you are directing them and so forth and allowing other people to, you know, be themselves in the midst of that, too, just like the people that build the things in steel. It doesn't become a totally impersonal process, but it is still something I am doing. And it works the way it works. I mean, I remember people being somewhat – some people being a little disturbed. Oh, you used power tools? You know, hey, come on, your energy goes right through a power tool or through another person, so to speak. It is kind of all the same.

MS. RICHARDS: Another question about working methods. It sounds like you could be working on many pieces at once, or at least you could have them built. And you are working for a whole show, so it sounds like ideally you would have many pieces in process at once in the studio. But are you actually completing each one, one at a time, bringing them up to perfection before you do another one?

MR. MCCRACKEN: I do have several things that are only semi-related in the studio. But usually it is a whole show. And usually I finish them all at the same time.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you know for certain that something is done? I mean, is that an issue? Is it perfect enough? Or have you –

MR. MCCRACKEN: Oh, you mean like technically? Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah. I am either done it or not. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: And do you ever want to have an earlier series of works in the studio as a reference for any reason?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Not particularly, not especially. No, I don't think so.

MS. RICHARDS: When you are preparing a body of work for a show, do you ever have the wish to hold something back or to say from the very beginning to the dealer, you know, I want to keep one thing?

MR. MCCRACKEN: I have had that wish since, but I have never done it. [Laughs.] So too bad. I mean, I have a whole collection now, but I don't - I just let them all go, usually. I keep very, very few, three or four. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: Do you end up keeping the ones that the dealer didn't want?

MR. MCCRACKEN: No, no, no. I mean, I gave one to my wife, so she keeps it kind of thing. So essentially, I haven't kept anything.

MS. RICHARDS: When you were working on the large pieces, you were also - this is in the '70s - working on smaller pieces. And you also called them objects. But sometimes I thought that you referred to them as - if the large pieces, the planks or the columns, were humans in some way, it had kind of a human presence. The smaller pieces were gestures, or they also had elements of humanness to them rather than referring to a TV or a toaster or some inanimate object. Is that a correct reading?

MR. MCCRACKEN: I tended to think of them all in the same way, I think. The smaller ones and larger ones, they both need presence, and the smaller ones are smaller. That is all. A squirrel is small, and an elephant is big. And I was trying to avoid too much in the way of reference, as I wasn't trying to make the - excuse me - the planks, columns, and so forth too much like humans either, even though there is more of a relationship scale-wise and so forth. So it was kind of all the same, really.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you think of the larger pieces as major works, and the smaller pieces as minor or less than major works?

MR. MCCRACKEN: I suppose, I suppose, more or less.

MS. RICHARDS: So what would make you decide to do an exhibition with a lot of smaller pieces?

MR. MCCRACKEN: I don't know if I have ever done that or not. Sometimes there just are smaller pieces in the show. Does that come down to just variety or something like that?

MS. RICHARDS: Is there a sense that you want to finish? There is a kind of rhythm in the studio. You spend a long time doing a big piece. Now you feel like getting something done more quickly, and you are going to do a smaller piece just because of the physical hours it takes.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Not really, not really. The small ones aren't all that much less work than the big ones, actually. I mean, moving a big column around is a bit of a hefty job itself, polishing all that surface. But I tend to think of them as pretty much the same. I mean, for a show, it seems like usually I want to make large things, so that it shows up, and it is kind of cohesive. And if you have too many things on stands, on the pedestals, it can kind of mess it up a little bit, even though, like, say, the first Wilder show was largely stands, pedestals. But that is all right, too.

MS. RICHARDS: That was at a time before sculpture came off the pedestal.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. I don't mind pedestals too much, except I think they don't work in shows too well anymore, and I haven't done them for some time. So usually a small piece, it might be as a wall piece, as a commission or something that won't go into a show, but might sit on a coffee table or someplace that is kind of natural in a home.

MS. RICHARDS: Could it sit on the floor?

MR. MCCRACKEN: No, not a small one, because then they are too little.

MS. RICHARDS: They can't be seen properly.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Right. They just have to be raised up, I think, just kind of, in the same sense, a plank can't be that high either. Leaning against the wall, it just doesn't - it won't look right.

MS. RICHARDS: One more question before we end today. You said that you were working for a show. And sometimes if this were a museum show or a gallery show in a distant place, do you create detailed installation instructions? Let's say, going back to the '60s, '70s, did you create detailed installation instructions, how the pieces should be placed, the planks should be a certain number of inches from the wall?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, yeah, I did all that, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: And how everything should be handled.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: So that it could be installed without you.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, right, right. And also, often because they would be installed before I went there. And so the handlers would do it that way.

MS. RICHARDS: And what about the lighting, which would seem to be such a crucial element with the reflective –

MR. MCCRACKEN: That is something I usually allow to be worked out, just let it be worked out by the gallery, because after they are there – it is pretty hard to work out the lighting beforehand. I have done some of that in recent years through using 3-D computer programs that produce photograph-like results. So I can show everything, including the lighting. Except even there, I haven't specified the lighting through those. I have only lit them in the renderings to make them look pretty good, you know, make the highlights show up where they should be and a bunch of shadows and so forth. But still, they have always been actually lit after they are in the gallery.

But there I will have all the colors in the computer and not always even the exact colors, but just to show the idea of the show sometimes.

MS. RICHARDS: Are you flexible or interested in unexpected results with lighting if something – I mean, as you said, sometimes the color looks different. The reflective quality would be different.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, in a way, that always happens to some extent. If it happens too much, then that might be an issue. It might be something that is distracting from the work. But almost always it is a surprise, because different colors and – you never know quite what you have until you look at it in the real.

MS. RICHARDS: So you don't try to create gallery kind of lighting in your studio to see what it is going to look like?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Right, even though I have something like – might have something like – gallery lighting in the studio, it is going to be totally – in fact, one show I did, the show at Zwirner [David Zwirner Gallery, New York, NY] before the last one, so it was '06, I think it was, a bunch of black columns, six black columns in one room and others in another room. And in the studio – see, I made them all different blacks. And in the studio, I thought, oh, my God, they are so different. One is red, one is blue, and they are really different. I thought, well, it is too late; it is too late. That is the way they are. But when they got into the gallery, they looked exactly alike. I had been trying to do – I couldn't tell them apart because, one thing, they were farther apart and so on. So that was a bit of a surprise. It was pleasant.

I mean, it was kind of both pleasant and funny in the studio to see them so different.

MS. RICHARDS: A little disconcerting, too; you have so little control.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, yeah, yeah. It is like, oh, gosh, I guess I didn't do a black show after all, is what I literally thought. But it turned out I had. I didn't know it until it was actually in the studio – I mean, at the gallery. And that kind of dovetails a little bit into the – [inaudible] – piece, especially the faceted pieces that have different shapes or different angles to them, each side looking so different in any given light condition.

MS. RICHARDS: Thank you.

[END CARD 3.]

This is Judith Richards interviewing John McCracken in New York City on August 4, 2010, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc four.

John, to more or less pick up where we left off a few months ago, I wanted to ask you about your teaching, a substantial part of which was done at UCSB [University of California, Santa Barbara] for around 10 years, I think, around '76 to '85.

MR. MCCRACKEN: The first teaching I did was at Irvine, and then I went to UCLA. Each time was a couple of years. And then I came to New York and taught at Hunter and also School of Visual Arts; is that it?

MS. RICHARDS: That is right.

MR. MCCRACKEN: And in Nevada, I taught in Nevada for a little while. And then I think I went to Santa Barbara.

MS. RICHARDS: How did you end up there?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Good question. Maybe it was largely because I had met a woman who was kind of friend there, was from Santa Barbara. We became kind of involved. And she had a place in Las Vegas, where I was teaching. Las Vegas - [inaudible].

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, we talked about that last time. Yes, yes.

MR. MCCRACKEN: The space there is great.

MS. RICHARDS: So when you went to Santa Barbara, did you go to teach sculpture? Was it a full-time position?

MR. MCCRACKEN: No, I don't think I ever had full-time positions. I may have, but most of my teaching things were part-time. And that was, too. I flew there for a while in a small plane, which was kind of great. And eventually, I then moved to Santa Barbara.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you enjoy teaching?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, I did, I did. It was a lot of fun. At first, I was, of course, nervous and didn't know how to talk to groups and so forth. But that evolved as time went on. And I really enjoyed teaching and criticizing work and rambling around about ideas and so forth.

MS. RICHARDS: What would you say your teaching method was, your approach to teaching?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Well, freewheeling, kind of. I never wrote out any talks or, you know, plans or anything like that. I would just start from nowhere and so forth and go. Even big classes, for a while, I had kind of - I don't know what you call those rooms that they hold 300 people. They were filled up with people, and I was talking to large groups. And that is why I was talking about, I think, UCSB has - I think they kind of pushed us out under the door or something like that. But I was teaching what I called "Psychic Traveling," which is just investigating psychic phenomena. And that was a lot of fun.

MS. RICHARDS: Was that part of the course, or was that the title of a course?

MR. MCCRACKEN: That was the title of the course.

MS. RICHARDS: And it was a lecture?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, yeah. Really, they were lecture courses and connected with art and so forth and art ideas and so on. Some people were sort of scandalized by it. But -

MS. RICHARDS: What kind of people?

MR. MCCRACKEN: University people. The guy who ran Creative Studies, College of Creative Studies, where I taught, liked it and liked what I did, and so it was fine in relation to him. When he died, however, I was kind of all but kicked out.

MS. RICHARDS: Not just told not to teach that course, but actually kicked out from the university?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Kind of, not really, but just things kind of evolved rather quickly by the time - [inaudible]. And I had met Gail -

MS. RICHARDS: How did - sorry.

MR. MCCRACKEN: I met her in, I think, '82, before the Santa Barbara thing ended or evolved into nothing. And also, I was invited to show in Los Angeles by a dealer, and so I did. As soon as I left - as soon as I left Santa Barbara and went to L.A. with Gail, and we rented a loft and so forth. I was kind of impressed by the fact that immediately my income tripled, from switching from the kind of teaching I was doing to art, to making art. And then things went from there.

MS. RICHARDS: Tell me how you met Gail. She is also an artist, I think.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, yeah. Just, it is hard to say how I met her. I just met her. [Laughs.] She was hanging out with a group of people that were the kind that I was hanging out with. She never was a student of mine. But she was - I think she was taking courses at UCSB, so she was there as a student some of the time. Anyway, I

just kind of got together with her, which is real fortuitous. And we went off to L.A. and started that adventure.

MS. RICHARDS: Before I go to L.A., just one more question about the class. Were you teaching other classes as well as that lecture?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, I was teaching that one and also just sculpture and painting and was there one called "Drawing"? I am not sure. They were the usual kind of classifications.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you have any memorable students?

MR. MCCRACKEN: I can't remember any. No.

MS. RICHARDS: All right. So switching to L.A., you moved in '86 or '85. Where in L.A. did you live?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Downtown. We rented a loft downtown at First and Center.

MS. RICHARDS: How did you pick that location?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Some people we knew tried that place, and they were going to let it go. We had looked around and didn't have a very easy time finding anything. That one seemed fine, so we rented it.

MS. RICHARDS: And did you have your studio there, as well?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, yeah. It was a studio and living.

MS. RICHARDS: Was it on the ground floor?

MR. MCCRACKEN: No, where was it? No, it was the second floor.

MS. RICHARDS: But you didn't have any issues with the elevator?

MR. MCCRACKEN: No, not really. I don't know if we used it much. Did we? Was it second floor, or was it the ground floor? Did we walk up stairs? I can't remember now. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: So going to your work in the early '80s, I think that around that time, you began creating works that have facets rather than perfectly rectangular.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: What at first brought you to look at facets? And did those begin in your sketchbook, in your sketchbooks, at that time?

MR. MCCRACKEN: I guess they are in things that are kind of related to crystals and so forth. I am not sure what sketches I did and so forth and exactly when in relation to making those pieces. But I just was interested in, for one thing, in crystals and in odd shapes and so forth. So I made some.

One of the first things I found out was that I could do a sketch of a faceted piece, but just a sketch just left me in the cold because there was no way of translating it with any exactness into a three-dimensional plank or, you know, thing. So I had to get a computer. I had to start using computers for 3-D forms and so forth, which, of course, I did.

MS. RICHARDS: You talk – and I don't know if it is relevant at that moment in the early '80s – about your interest in synesthesia and the creation of color with sound or sound with color, the breaking down of barriers between those two and a connection between the heard and the seen. Is that correct?

MR. MCCRACKEN: I don't quite remember very much about that.

MS. RICHARDS: And relating that to [Wassily] Kandinsky and the early 20th-century artists who explored those ideas.

MR. MCCRACKEN: I guess I did. I remember that there is something about – like some people can hear and see –

MS. RICHARDS: – in color.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, that is it. [Inaudible.] And I think that is one of the characteristics, too. One of the things that artists can often do is they seem to hear, visually, things and – or what is the other – [inaudible]?

MS. RICHARDS: Visualize sound?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Was this all part – was this connected, your interest in that and interest in psychic phenomenon –

MR. MCCRACKEN: [Inaudible] – trying to get in that door.

MS. RICHARDS: Thinking about the course that you talked about teaching, which you mentioned briefly, and an interest in psychic phenomenon, was that an ongoing interest, a longstanding interest that began in the earliest part of your career? Or was it something going on in the early '80s, or when you were at Santa Barbara, that introduced you to these ideas and that caused you to be exploring various avenues in this?

MR. MCCRACKEN: No, actually I was always interested in that area of stuff.

MS. RICHARDS: From reading, in part?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, I don't know. I was interested in it, and I did read about it. It just seemed like studying somewhat past the edges of usual reality and so forth.

MS. RICHARDS: Right.

MR. MCCRACKEN: It was interesting to me.

MS. RICHARDS: You talked also, I think, about exploring dreams and getting inspiration from dreams or other kinds of unusual states of mind. How did that actually play out in your work?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Not to a huge extent, actually. Some artists I know use dreams as reference points and idea – you know, for ideas for works.

MS. RICHARDS: Artists you were friends with at that time?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Who can you mention?

MR. MCCRACKEN: I remember DeWain Valentine said he had never made pieces that he didn't dream about. I didn't really work that way. I just was interested in dreams and so forth, but I didn't really use them specifically to make art, as far as I knew anyway. I probably did without knowing it, you know.

MS. RICHARDS: How did you find the L.A. art community when you moved there? Did you develop new relationships or see people you already –

MR. MCCRACKEN: I met a lot of people. And I had my first gallery show there. Going back to '65 now, I showed with Wilder. And so I kind of was already established in Los Angeles when we went back in '85, I guess.

MS. RICHARDS: And do you recall what kind of changes your work was going through at that moment in time? I think that you started exploring a different kind of painted surface, a kind of marbled surface.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, I guess so.

MS. RICHARDS: There were some planks you did with marble paint in 1986.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: What provoked you to explore that after you had had –

MR. MCCRACKEN: I don't know. I was kind of mixing the painting and sculpture, something that you typically can't do. But that is what I was doing. And with the idea of that, I was maybe partly succeeding in painting in a free way, in midair kind of thing. So that is –

MS. RICHARDS: What do you mean by midair?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Well, like a plank or something. You see a plank, instead of being one color, would be a bunch of colors. It would be like a painting kind of business and three dimensions. So, yeah, I thought of sculptures as being like that anyway. They were kind of like strokes of color in midair and space, you know, in a 3-D space.

MS. RICHARDS: Would you picture the model color – maybe that is the wrong term, I don't know how you describe that surface – as in some way breaking up the space and creating more ambiguity that you might be looking for in terms of the shape and the form of the piece?

MR. MCCRACKEN: I guess so. I think I ended up thinking that they were a little bit – it was kind of pushing it to do something that actually mixed painting and sculpture. They don't mix very often, at least to that extent and in that way.

MS. RICHARDS: So it was an experiment that you decided to end?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: You also maybe experimented using varathane instead of polyester resin at that time? Why did you – what were you looking for?

MR. MCCRACKEN: That was the same, just an attempt to use a painterly kind of thing in sculpture. And the varathane and paint and so forth seemed to promise that I would – [inaudible] – that way.

MS. RICHARDS: I also wanted to ask you, around the same time, a little earlier, 1984, you did a piece called *Four-Part Plank*, all black – all black wasn't part of the title, but four pieces that were very tall and narrow.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Two-by-fours?

MS. RICHARDS: I think they were separate blacks. But this might have been the first multipart piece you did.

MR. MCCRACKEN: It might have been.

MS. RICHARDS: – which was a significant step, obviously, something you continue to do now.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: What was in your mind when you opened that door, started making multipart pieces?

MR. MCCRACKEN: I don't know really. I am trying to think if that was actually when I first made multipart pieces. Maybe it was. But it gave me the chance to kind of have a piece and encompass more space than a single object would. So I found that interesting.

MS. RICHARDS: A sense of creating more of an environment using more space?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Maybe, maybe. I had done pieces that were really environmental before.

MS. RICHARDS: Right, we talked about the white forms that filled the space.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah. I don't know. Often I didn't really have much of anything in my mind, and I would just work. I would just try things, you know.

MS. RICHARDS: What would be the difference between creating a four-part piece and four pieces that you installed adjacent to each other to create an environment?

MR. MCCRACKEN: I am not sure I know what you mean, because four pieces are four pieces. They might go together sort of, but they remain four separate pieces. But this one you referred to is a four-part piece, so it is one piece; so that is how it is different.

MS. RICHARDS: I guess I was trying to imagine if you –

MR. MCCRACKEN: Usually, I try to make works that stand on their own in an individual way. So if I were to make four individual, separate pieces, they would look that way, I believe, rather than looking like parts of one piece. There could be a difference in that – [inaudible].

MS. RICHARDS: As you were working through the '80s, you started in '88 to work in stainless steel.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: How did that involvement happen? What were you looking for when you thought about working in stainless steel? What were your goals for that?

MR. MCCRACKEN: A little bit hard to say.

MS. RICHARDS: It seems -

MR. MCCRACKEN: I had been interested in making things out of metal since the '60s, I think it was. And I never found a practical way to do it until the beginning, in about '88, because I had to be able to afford it, for one thing - and that was not a small matter - and find somebody who could do those kinds of things.

I kind of wanted - I kind of wanted some UFO-nauts to make a piece with their supposedly sophisticated technology and all that. And I didn't quite do that, of course, at first. But there was a motivation. I wanted almost perfect-looking things to appear. And steel seemed to be a good way to do it.

MS. RICHARDS: Were there other sculptors who were using stainless steel whose work somehow inspired you to also try it?

MR. MCCRACKEN: I don't think so. I don't know of anybody who was doing anything of that sort. I looked hard to see if there was anybody.

MS. RICHARDS: There were artists in the '60s who were using stainless steel to create very polished, reflective surfaces.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, yeah. And - [inaudible] - materials and so forth. But they weren't doing things that used a technique like I used, which is like seamless, essentially. And something that gives the illusion of a solid piece. There were people who were doing things like a plate on a plate on plate and so forth, and you see the seams. But that is much different, with a different effect and so forth. That never interested me.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you find a workshop in L.A. that you could use to create these pieces and the technology that you needed?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, yeah. This guy, Jack Brogan -

MS. RICHARDS: Brogan?

MR. MCCRACKEN: He made the first steel works. He made steel works in '88 and '89.

MS. RICHARDS: How did you finance those? You were talking about money being a big issue.

MR. MCCRACKEN: A combination of myself and my gallery, the gallery I was with.

MS. RICHARDS: Which gallery was that?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Fred Hoffman [Fred Hoffman Fine Art, Santa Monica, CA].

MS. RICHARDS: What were the differences in the sculptural concerns, if any, that you faced when you thought about working in stainless steel instead of in plywood and resin, as you had been?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Say that again. What were the what?

MS. RICHARDS: When you were thinking about your pieces, the shape, the scale, the color, lack of color, all the issues that you would, even intuitively, have in your mind when you were thinking about what the next piece would be, when you are working in stainless steel, how did that change? How did those concerns and issues change?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Not much actually. It was about the same. I was just working with steel, and I started resin and trying to - [inaudible] - similar finish and so forth, just using steel instead of resin, instead of color. I mean, steel has a color, so it wasn't all that different.

MS. RICHARDS: So what was your secret technique? How did you develop this new method to make an entirely seamless form?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Steel, you are talking about? Well, they had to be welded. They had to be constructed and welded together and clamped down. That still happens. The methods now are more sophisticated and involve large machines and so forth instead of being done, essentially, by hand, but it is not really a secret. It is just terrifically difficult.

The first steel pieces were like some of the first resin pieces I did. They were kind of a little bit wavy and so forth, because they had evidence of hand-doneness, a little bit too much of that and so forth. And as time went on, they got better, and they are better now. So it was a matter of developing a technique and having that evolve in a way that I liked to see.

MS. RICHARDS: Mm-hm. [Affirmative.] When you thought about manufacturing these pieces, were you doing them with a show in mind, that you would do a whole series? Or did you really start very tentatively experimenting and thinking about whether you were going to be satisfied with this new material?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Let's see. I am trying to remember that now. I am not sure. I don't think I had a show in mind, actually. No, I didn't. It turned out I should have. I should have shown them off, but I didn't do that for some time. I do that now. I think steel pieces, or whatever pieces, in terms of the whole show and whole group, in relation to the space - [inaudible] - all that sort of thing.

MS. RICHARDS: Was the use of stainless steel in your mind - you talked about UFOs - did they have more of a sense of time markers or something that is more universal, in a sense, rather than compared to the pieces that had color? Were they less earthbound because of their stainless, reflective surface rather than color?

MR. MCCRACKEN: I don't think so. I don't think so. They might kind of be that way. But I didn't really think of them as being that way, except that they are more permanent, I suppose. Or are they? Steel is polished. Steel is a little bit on the fragile side, like resin is. Does anything last forever? No.

MS. RICHARDS: Are they meant to go outdoors?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, yeah, they are. They have to be maintained, of course. But they are meant to go outdoors.

MS. RICHARDS: Was one of your interests in working in stainless steel because you could create pieces more readily that would be outdoors?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Actually, yeah, that was one of the thoughts. Steel - [inaudible] - is, it could be outdoors. I have not been able to make - I am glad you brought that up because, for many years, I was kind of frustrated at not being able to make - not seeming to be able to make works that went outdoors, and the steel brought that into a possibility.

MS. RICHARDS: And what was the reason you wanted to have work outdoors?

MR. MCCRACKEN: It is just cool to do that. That is all. We just wanted to have -

MS. RICHARDS: Any competitive sense of other sculptors whose works were outdoors?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Not really. I just wanted to have things outdoors. One thing that happens with reflective steel is that they work outdoors kind of amazingly, in some ways, because they reflect the trees and the foliage and all that sort of thing, sometimes. Sometimes they seem to disappear right in front of your face, which I really like. I like that quality, that characteristic.

And it kind of pinpoints something I like a lot about sculpture and about the work I do, or try to do, which is to make things that have a distinct materiality and resistance, but that can seem to have no existence; so that is to disappear or be transparent or to not be there almost. [Inaudible] - like a *Star Trek* phenomenon or something like that.

MS. RICHARDS: In addition to making very highly reflective surfaces that would cause this confusion, did you ever imagine doing pieces using completely transparent material like Plexiglas or glass?

MR. MCCRACKEN: I considered it, but only for a second, because I didn't want to do anything that involved what I would almost call trickery or the oddnesses of materials that do phenomenal things. I didn't want to really do that, but rather have something that was more straightforward and matter of fact, and yet, at the same time, have it be transcendental or seem to be of another kind of category or something.

MS. RICHARDS: Speaking of reflectiveness, did you ever imagine using water in a piece, making a horizontal form that had a surface of water?

MR. MCCRACKEN: No, not really, not really. Other artists took care of that okay.

MS. RICHARDS: Right, right. Those pieces in '88 to '90, some of them, or maybe all of them, had Greek words as titles. Why did you name them like that? *Samothrace, PleiadesPleiades* -

MR. MCCRACKEN: *Pleiades*. I was actually -

MS. RICHARDS: - *Perseus*.

MR. MCCRACKEN: - stars. Those are stars, pretty much, *Pleiades* and - [inaudible]. But the titles, I just used

words and concept words that I liked and that weren't to my mind too distracting from a piece. I never used long titles like Stieglitz or something like that because it could conflict with the work. And I tried using - early, I tried using factual titles like *Blue Block* and *Three Parts* and that sort of thing. That worked for a while. But then that seemed kind of flat and kind of maybe not as interesting as some words, some concept or something. So I just kind of intuitively thought up - came across or selected words that worked okay.

MS. RICHARDS: Is the selection of the titles something that happens when the work is done completely?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, often, usually so, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you think about naming pieces all at once, or you might do five or six pieces, not title them immediately, have them all done, and then title them as a group?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Usually I do - I mean, I am not sure what you mean.

MS. RICHARDS: Well, if a number of pieces have the names of stars, once you make one piece the name of a star, did you decide, you know, I am going to name the next so many pieces in the same fashion?

MR. MCCRACKEN: I didn't really intend to stick to anything like that. You are going around using names of stars, but then something else might pop up in my mind or whatever.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah, like *Hopi*.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, right, right. That is not the name of a star, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: It seems - correct me if I am wrong - at the same time as you were working on these stainless steel pieces, you continued to work with the resin?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Oh, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: And doing even more complex, twisted forms?

MR. MCCRACKEN: I did? [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah, you had wonderful triangular forms, prism forms, what I would say is a twist in the facets. How would you - you talked earlier about the forms being like personages and characteristics of people. As you were making these forms more complex, having more sides and angles and, obviously, more potential for reflection and visual excitement, even though - [inaudible] - color, they could look different in different lights, what did that reflect about your thinking in terms of these pieces being somehow not human but, kind of, humanistic form?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Personages or something like that?

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah, yeah.

MR. MCCRACKEN: It is really just that with all the works I made, I tried to have them have existence or have being of their own. And often I would characterize that by referring to people or beings or something as kind of a metaphor. Inside that, there is - you can make a piece that maybe is interesting form-wise and so forth, and does a few things, but doesn't have being. I don't know if you can understand what I mean or not.

Some things do, and some things don't. And I tried to have them do. I tried to have being that was of the type that one could somewhat imagine that they were representative of actual intelligent beings or something like that. One entity that I read some of sometime back - it was a channeled entity - was asked, what do you look like, and what he might look like visually if he showed up visually. And he said, "Well, it is kind of hard to say." He said, "But actually, maybe if I showed up visually, I might look like kind of a circularish, crystal-like form that is rotating, or something like that." To me, that made sense. It was easy to see that that might be the case, and this character might look different at a different time.

But there would have been a sense of being there that would be something you would notice instead of it being an object that has to - [inaudible] - or something like a dumpster or something like that.

MS. RICHARDS: So those twists and multifaceted pieces added to the sense of being?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, there were just inspirations, and continued with that kind of thinking. Yeah, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: During that time when you were in L.A. in the late '80s, what was the art scene like? Who were your closest artist friends? What was the social scene like for you?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Eighties, the wild '80s? I was always involved more with sort of international art and New York art than with Los Angeles art, I think, even though I used L.A. types of things, like car finishes and so forth – [inaudible] – and so forth. And there were a few people that I did know there. But I don't know. I don't know that I was that involved in any part of the art scene particularly.

MS. RICHARDS: Well, speaking of the international [art scene] and New York, I know that in '86, it was a very important year in terms of your exhibitions, because you were in the Venice Biennale [Italy] in '86 and a show at P.S.1 [Contemporary Art Center, New York, NY] that was a retrospective ["Heroic Stance: The Sculpture of John McCracken, 1965-1986"].

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, P.S.1, yeah, right.

MS. RICHARDS: So there is New York and Italy.

MR. MCCRACKEN: That was a survey show, actually.

MS. RICHARDS: It was a survey. So you were in L.A. Were you ever thinking, why am I in L.A.? Maybe I should be in New York.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Kind of, kind of. When I left – [inaudible] – is, I left the Bay Area, where I went to school. I went to L.A. thinking that, well, I have got to go where there is art happening and the galleries showing that are serious. And I was either going to go to New York or L.A., but I just went to L.A., for some reason. And I did think that I should move on and go to New York afterwards, which I did and didn't do, I guess. So I don't know if I answered your question or not.

MS. RICHARDS: And then eventually, in the early '90s, you did move from L.A. You moved to New Mexico.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: So at that point, why did you leave L.A., and why did you choose New Mexico?

MR. MCCRACKEN: By that time, we were kind of tired of L.A. and tired of living in that loft that we lived in, and just went to New Mexico for some reason. I don't know why.

MS. RICHARDS: Did it have anything to do with other L.A. artists who lived there?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Not really, not really.

MS. RICHARDS: There is a little congregation of them in Santa Fe.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, I know, yeah. It is kind of a destination for – there are a lot of artists there.

MS. RICHARDS: But in particular, artists have - of, more or less, your generation from Los Angeles and Taos.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, right, right, right.

MS. RICHARDS: Had you visited New Mexico for vacations or other kinds of –

MR. MCCRACKEN: No. Gail and I just went there and took a look and decided, you know, let's buy a place here. And I think that is how we did it. We just came out again and bought a house in New Mexico without really thinking much in terms of who else lived there and so forth. I think we kind of, to some extent, we found out afterward who was there – [inaudible].

MS. RICHARDS: But did it have to do with leaving L.A. and leaving – even though it wasn't New York and a part of the art world - to go to a much more artistically isolated place, even though – or culturally isolated, even though there is lots of culture and many artists living in New Mexico, still it is not a major art center.

MR. MCCRACKEN: No.

MS. RICHARDS: I mean, did it have to do with the sky and the light and the sense of openness?

MR. MCCRACKEN: It came to be about that, to an extent. I never really cared much about where I was, where I worked. I just wanted to be comfortable and conducive to making work and, you know, not too distracting and all that sort of thing. So I never really thought too much in terms of any group of artists or scene or even gallery scene or whatever, but just thought in terms of living in some kind of cool place.

New Mexico seemed that way. We found out afterward that there were lots of artists there, and in a way, it was kind of comfortable being – excuse me – being there because of the presence of arts and crafts, even though

most of it wasn't of a type that was directly interesting to me. It made it kind of nice.

The skies there are just knockouts, both in the day and nighttime. And we just really enjoyed being out in the country for a change.

MS. RICHARDS: In L.A., you had a studio in the place you lived.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Was that an ideal situation that you tried to replicate when you moved to New Mexico?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Just to an extent. L.A. wasn't quite ideal because fumes would kind of get into the living area. It was like all one space. But in New Mexico, I had a separate space for a studio, so that worked quite a lot better.

MS. RICHARDS: So how did you – was it a smooth transition finding a studio space, setting it up in New Mexico, in Santa Fe, right?

MR. MCCRACKEN: No, actually, the first one was north of Santa Fe about 50 miles. It wasn't –

MS. RICHARDS: What town was that?

MR. MCCRACKEN: What town was it? It was Medanales. Is that it? How could I forget something like that? [Laughs.] It is a town that is not on some maps.

MS. RICHARDS: Tell me the name again.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Medanales. M-E-D-A-N-A-L-E-S. Even natives say Mendanales, but it is Medanales.

MS. RICHARDS: And it is north of Santa Fe?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, yeah, like on the way to Albuquerque, on the way to Albuquerque.

MS. RICHARDS: So northwest?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, northwest.

MS. RICHARDS: And why did you pick that place?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Well, we found a house that we could afford. We looked in Santa Fe at first, and everything was too expensive, so we went – so we just kept on looking and found a house that was being built as a spec house, and it just sort of grabbed our attention.

MS. RICHARDS: And you found a space for a studio nearby?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Well, we had the builder add a slightly extra-size garage that I used as a studio. So that is how it happened.

MS. RICHARDS: And then when did you actually move from there to Santa Fe?

MR. MCCRACKEN: When was that anyway?

MS. RICHARDS: I think it was '94 that you left L.A.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Oh, yeah, it was, yeah. I think we were in Medanales for maybe eight years or something like that. We bought the Santa Fe house in 2004, I think it was. But it was still under construction and all that, and it took awhile. It took two, three years for it to be finished. So it was that long before we actually moved in.

MS. RICHARDS: Then you found a separate space for studio in Santa Fe?

MR. MCCRACKEN: I built a studio behind the house, separate from the house.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, so that is the best of both worlds.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Okay. You mentioned sketchbooks a while ago. And I know there was a wonderful publication of your sketchbooks. But have you continued to keep sketchbooks all through the years to the present?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Not really – well, not the same kind of sketchbooks. Those first ones were 11-by-14 sheets and sketchbooks, kind of buy sketchbooks. But I just used those for a while and then went to typing-size paper for additional sketches and notes and so forth.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you still do that now?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: So in what way do those sketchbooks function in terms of the development of your ideas? I mean, is that the primary place that happens, that thinking, initial thinking about pieces?

MR. MCCRACKEN: In a way, it was. In a way, it is. If I just sort of blather down the ideas as I get them, often I can go back and be more selective as to what to make and so forth. So I always thought that the sketchbooks and notebooks and all that served as a kind of memory, kind of like a physical, visual memory, so that it was easier to remember things. And sometimes I would go to something in a sketchbook and kind of get ideas from that for something else. So I think that it has worked like sketchbooks work, you know, like sketches – [inaudible].

MS. RICHARDS: If we were sitting in your studio right now, what would we see on the walls?

MR. MCCRACKEN: In my studio now in Santa Fe?

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Nothing on the walls, I think.

MS. RICHARDS: Is that typical that there is nothing on the walls?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Probably.

MS. RICHARDS: You wouldn't put a sketch up on the wall or an image of someone else's work or your older work?

MR. MCCRACKEN: No, probably not, probably not. I didn't really get around to using that space in some ways that I probably would have used it, like putting up sketches or oil painting, works or whatever. I really just used the place as a workshop kind of thing, and so there is not much stuff on the walls.

MS. RICHARDS: Is that consistent with the way your studios have looked all through the years?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, probably so, probably so. Yeah. Usually I make things and finish them, and off they go. I have very little chance to stop and look at them or to sort of install them in some way – [inaudible].

MS. RICHARDS: Does that bother you?

MR. MCCRACKEN: No, not too much. Sometimes it kind of does. But I can never see that – [inaudible]. Sometimes I think I lose out a little bit by not looking a little bit more at my works. But I am used to have things just leave immediately. In some ways, I don't mind that at all.

MS. RICHARDS: Could you imagine planning for them to stay with you for weeks or months, depending on how much time you wanted to be with them?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, yeah. But I really haven't felt that that was necessary. By the time I finish a piece, I have been with it for a long time anyway. And even though they are always a surprise, and they are always different when they are finished – [inaudible] – and looking at and living with and all that sort of thing. Well, I do a certain amount of that, too. At our house in Santa Fe, we had a plank for a while at the end of the hallway. It was great to have it there and so forth. So we were then living with a work. And so there is a certain amount of that.

MS. RICHARDS: You might feel rather cheated not to be able to live with it.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Kind of, kind of, although, as I say, I am used to having things just leave immediately.

MS. RICHARDS: You are stoic about it.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah. I am just used to that.

MS. RICHARDS: Does that in some way actually benefit you, because it pushes you onto the next piece?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Maybe. Maybe it keeps things kind of clean or something.

MS. RICHARDS: It doesn't tie you to the previous idea, you mean?

MR. MCCRACKEN: I kind of tend to make things for other people, for the world and so forth. And so that is where they ought to go. Some artists don't like to let things go. They like to hang onto everything. I am just not that way at all. Once they are done, I kick them out the door. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: Have you ever entered into any competitions for commissions or applied for a commissioned piece?

MR. MCCRACKEN: A few times. There was something in Las Vegas a few years ago for a metal things or whatever they were, metal things, I guess, on my part -

[END CARD 4.]

MS. RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards interviewing John McCracken on August 4, 2010, in New York City for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc five.

Another question about process. When you have an idea for a piece, do you ever think maybe I did one like this before? I have noticed there are red planks throughout your career that have slight differences, but they are more or less similar. Is it an issue that you might be repeating yourself in any way, or if it is a compelling idea, it doesn't matter how many times you do it?

MR. MCCRACKEN: No, it doesn't matter much. Usually I remember anyway how thick a piece was and how wide it was, so I don't repeat myself. And colors come out different and all that. So it is not so much of an issue. Even if a thing is kind of identical or something, it is still - it is still different than what it is identical to because it exists in a different time frame and was made at a different time. That is important. It maybe has a different title and whatever.

MS. RICHARDS: I have a quote that is interesting. You said you would rather - "I would rather have my work survive in slightly altered form." In other words, even if they need to be repaired and they are not exactly the same. And that you know that they are going to experience the world, and they are going to be going through various changes.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: But does that mean that, in fact - or could you imagine that you could leave plans, and if a work were actually destroyed, someone else could recreate it with your plans?

MR. MCCRACKEN: It kind of means that. It is a little bit like, who knows, really? But it is kind of like, well, if you have your choice between your work not existing anymore or existing in kind of a slightly warped state, which do you take? Which do you do? You might not want a work thing [ph], or you might want one. It could get to be kind of a funny thing, I suppose, if things were reproduced, or produced, in a really kind of awkward, warped kind of way, you know.

MS. RICHARDS: Well, the color, for example, couldn't possibly be exactly as you would have made it.

MR. MCCRACKEN: I might come back 5,000 years from now and look at some really odd things that bear little resemblance to my own work.

MS. RICHARDS: Right.

MR. MCCRACKEN: I was kind of trying to think a little bit ideally, too, and imagining that maybe there would be enough knowledge and technology and so forth for people to make things that weren't too outrageously different and so forth, that still had the idea there.

MS. RICHARDS: You have talked about wanting your work to have an impact on the world. So that would be a way for them to continue to do that if they could be recreated as closely to the original as possible.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, although they might have very little impact or very little interaction with the world, I suppose, if they are too screwball. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: Well, they have been well documented.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: You have written some yourself about your work. Is that because you want to be sure that people get it right or because you enjoy writing about your work?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Both, I think, and also to some extent, I have done writing to try to figure out my own work. I tend to work intuitively and sometimes find that I don't know very much about my own work. I tend to maybe not know any more than anybody else, kind of, about it. So I try to find out by writing. But other times, I just like to communicate about it as much as I can.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you feel that part of the goal of communicating is to counter misrepresentations that others have expressed about your work, other writers?

MR. MCCRACKEN: To an extent, I guess. There hasn't been too much in the way of misrepresentation of my work because there hasn't been too much in the way of representation of my work, really.

MS. RICHARDS: You feel it hasn't been written about as much as you think it should have been?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Maybe so, maybe. Writers have seemed not to know what to say, which isn't altogether a bad thing either. But why not just stop people in their tracks when they don't know what to say? That is fine.

MS. RICHARDS: Is this something that you have talked to other artists about, and they have shared that feeling, as well?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Not so much, not really.

MS. RICHARDS: It seems possibly to be more of a problem for sculptors than painters, in my experience. Has that ever -

MR. MCCRACKEN: That could be, I suppose. Yeah. I guess - I don't know.

MS. RICHARDS: So in the process of writing, you are thinking about meaning.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah. I just like to write, too. That is the sort of alchemy or something that can lead one places.

MS. RICHARDS: Are there writers who inspire you to write?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Not really. Not people who are known as being writers so much. People who are - I was kind of turned on by Carl Jung for a while, for example - he is kind of not a writer, but a psychologist - and others who are more like psychic types and that sort of thing.

MS. RICHARDS: Are there other artists who have written about their work that have interested you, the writings themselves, the diaries, the journals, the notes that they have written?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Not much. I always appreciated the fact that artists would write about their own work or about the work of others and so forth. I think Dan Flavin did a bunch of that and also Don Judd and so forth. And I didn't ever study their writings very much, but I liked the fact that they did that.

MS. RICHARDS: Has most of your writing been for publication, or for your own personal use that you would want to keep private?

MR. MCCRACKEN: I suppose most of it is my own rambling and babbling and so forth.

MS. RICHARDS: That is meant to be private?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, more or less, I guess, or is best that way, I suppose. When I have written for publication, for some reason, I have found that I can get into it and like doing it in that kind of a special way. So there is that, too.

MS. RICHARDS: Do people - when you write for publication, do you get an editor asking you to make changes? And if you do, how do you feel about that?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Sometimes, sometimes. And sometimes I tell them, don't change anything. Don't even move a comma or anything like that. [Laughs.] And other times, though, they maybe have suggestions that are okay. It depends on the type of writing it is and the type of publication and so forth. A few things have been kind of screwed up by editors' ideas. I kind of early on got to where I don't want them to do much of anything, if possible. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: I want to ask you about a piece that is a little bit different, unusual to me in your work. It is called – it is from 1997, called *Be Through*. So there are two intersecting forms, a triangle and a rectangle, which seems unusual in your body of work, and I wondered what prompted you to make that piece.

MR. MCCRACKEN: I don't know. I wondered about that at the time. I just made it.

MS. RICHARDS: It was a one-off. You never did it again? Well, there were a few maybe, I think.

MR. MCCRACKEN: It seemed a little bit odd to me to do that, to have a form that seemed to intersect another form or actually do that and all that. I just did it. I don't know.

MS. RICHARDS: Was there some kind of spatial relationship you were curious about seeing?

MR. MCCRACKEN: No, not really. I mean, I don't think there is anything particularly unique about that. I ended up thinking that that piece was a little bit strange. It was just strange because it was that way. And it wasn't quite like the kind of thing that I tend to do, which is a singular – more of a singular form kind of idea.

MS. RICHARDS: So you did it, but you really couldn't see yourself in it.

MR. MCCRACKEN: No, I saw myself. [Inaudible.] It just seemed a little bit odd to have done that. That is all.

MS. RICHARDS: But it seems like you allow yourself to have these experiments, and you are perfectly capable of just walking away. Okay, I tried that.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Another experiment, which continued much longer, is that sense of graduated color that you started applying to your work in around 2000, a kind of metallic lacquer and gradations of color.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Within one piece.

MS. RICHARDS: Right.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, within one form.

MS. RICHARDS: Right.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah. I was spraying lacquers at that time. I ran across some lacquers that do that, that are like that. Some of them are very weird. Depending on the angle of view, they look red or blue or –

MS. RICHARDS: You know, there is nail polish like that now.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Oh, there is? Okay. And so I did a bunch of things using that stuff.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you feel that they were successful, those pieces?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, yeah, yeah. And they were fun to do.

MS. RICHARDS: In part because they were challenging? It was a new area that you wanted to perfect?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, yeah. I don't know.

MS. RICHARDS: What was it about the surface that you were creating that was intriguing to you, different than the solid color?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Well, they weren't all that different, in a way. Like you take a single-color resin piece that is the same color all over, especially a faceted one, and put it – mount it on a wall, say, and say it is a wall piece. You can wonder if one facet is a different color than another one or not, or if they are all the same or whatever. With a sprayed piece that really does that, it really doesn't – [inaudible] – because it still has a singular kind of sense to how it is treated as a form. And so it is not – [inaudible] – it is not so different, and it is not really the same either.

MS. RICHARDS: Was it complicated, time-consuming to refine the technique to get the effect that you wanted with this new paint?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Well, kind of. I did pieces that were both one color, but that is built up of layers or whatever,

so that they were one color and also some that did use this odd paint that looked different from different angles. But I didn't differentiate too much between one or the other.

MS. RICHARDS: So you said that was a sprayed-on paint?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, yeah. They were sprayed on a resin form that was the same as a resin piece, because the resin gave me flat surfaces and so forth. So they were ideal surfaces for also just spraying, spraying them.

MS. RICHARDS: And then you stopped using that paint?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, I guess I did.

MS. RICHARDS: What were the shortcomings that you found with it?

MR. MCCRACKEN: I don't know. I don't remember thinking that there were any shortcomings.

MS. RICHARDS: You just felt it had limited possibilities? You had explored all of them, and you were ready to move on?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Not really, not really. I just did it for a while, and then I didn't. I don't know.

MS. RICHARDS: You also then, more recently, have done pieces you have called *Diamond, Silver, Gold*, so you are exploring the idea of these -

MR. MCCRACKEN: I did pieces like that?

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah. There is a gold plank; there is a silver plank; there is one called *Diamond, 2006*.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Oh, those are the titles?

MS. RICHARDS: I'm sorry, the titles. But the way they look to me, as well.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Okay.

MS. RICHARDS: The color. Were you thinking about creating precious objects in a sense or referencing precious objects or gold bars or -

MR. MCCRACKEN: Not too much, really. I think, if I remember those right, I was just using those as titles. I remember a piece called *Diamond*, but it was a red plank or something. It was not particularly - it didn't have any relationship to a diamond.

MS. RICHARDS: And then you did one that was actually of bronze, right? Was it just called *Bronze*, or was it made of bronze? I think it was made of bronze.

MR. MCCRACKEN: I am not sure. It probably was a bronze plank, or a bronze piece.

MS. RICHARDS: Was that the first time you made bronze? That is a 2007 - a piece called *Swift*.

MR. MCCRACKEN: It is called *Swift*?

MS. RICHARDS: I think so.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Well, what is the bronze thing then?

MS. RICHARDS: And it is made of bronze.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Oh. I can't remember it very well, for some reason. I am just not sure if that is -

MS. RICHARDS: Maybe that is incorrect, my information.

MR. MCCRACKEN: I can't remember if - so evidently a piece called *Swift* is made of bronze.

MS. RICHARDS: It is a column that was listed as being made of bronze.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Oh, maybe it is. I have forgotten what the titles are of those bronze -

MS. RICHARDS: It is a large piece, 100 inches tall, approximately. Well, there wasn't any issue for you using bronze. This is not a moment that we need to discuss.

MR. MCCRACKEN: No, not really, not really.

MS. RICHARDS: When you were in documenta [Kassel, Germany] in 2007, you had a Mandala piece for '89, I think, as well as a more recent piece.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: I mean, an '89 work and an earlier Mandala painting. Was it your choice to – which I think we talked about the first part of this interview – was it your choice to put those two pieces in?

MR. MCCRACKEN: No.

MS. RICHARDS: And how did you feel about that, that curator putting in such an early piece and then in 1989 - I think it was a plank?

MR. MCCRACKEN: You mean, by two pieces –

MS. RICHARDS: At least two pieces.

MR. MCCRACKEN: – you mean [a] Mandala and a more recent piece?

MS. RICHARDS: Correct.

MR. MCCRACKEN: – because there were bronze columns. There was a bronze column, anyway, in the show.

MS. RICHARDS: Okay. But the question has to do with using – including that very, very early Mandala piece, which is so uncharacteristic of what people normally think of as your work. But maybe you were very eager to have it included. That is what my question is.

MR. MCCRACKEN: No –

MS. RICHARDS: Or maybe you were shocked it would be included.

MR. MCCRACKEN: I was a little bit surprised. The curators picked an odd array of pieces. That is all. They just did, and showed them. It wasn't really my doing. I didn't really have anything to do with it. [Laughs.] But the way they chose the show, it was that way. It was kind of outside the usual framework of art thought and so forth. So it just happened. I thought it was kind of entertaining, actually.

MS. RICHARDS: What do you mean by "entertaining"?

MR. MCCRACKEN: I was entertained by it. It was interesting to see that. I was just as glad to have my earlier works, some of my odd, unknown works shown and all that. That was fine. [Inaudible.]

MS. RICHARDS: I wanted to ask you about your relationships with galleries a bit. You have had many shows in galleries both here and abroad. And I was wondering, have all those exhibitions come about because someone contacted you, for example, the Konrad Fischer show in Dusseldorf in '89 or then L.A. Louver in '93 – I am just pulling out just a few random examples – or Lisson [Gallery] in London. I mean, did these happen because someone contacted you, or were you actively engaged in seeking out representation?

MR. MCCRACKEN: I think they usually contacted me, as far as I know, or somehow got into a conversation with whoever and worked into a show. But I think that it was them contacting me; usually, that worked.

MS. RICHARDS: When a gallery would contact you, what were your usual concerns, interests in thinking about making the decision to either have a show or even be represented by a gallery?

MR. MCCRACKEN: I don't know, just like thinking, how would this be, or who is this anyway? I mean, a number of galleries would ask me this and that and so forth, and there would be no – kind of no hope. Okay, so I am not doing anything with them because they just weren't right, you know.

MS. RICHARDS: You mean by that that they didn't have the –

MR. MCCRACKEN: They just weren't established enough or didn't have the right type of work or the right sense or whatever.

MS. RICHARDS: Were you also concerned about what the physical space looked like?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Were there times when you said, you know, I really want to come and – you felt they had a good reputation, but you actually hadn't seen the space, and you wanted to visit the space before you made your decision?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Kind of, yeah. I ended up showing at, kind of, more than one space that was really strange or awkward or whatever. [Laughs.] It didn't really seem to matter too much. You know, there is such a complex of things that go on when you consider a gallery and a dealer. I don't know. It is a business thing. It is an aesthetic thing and so forth. Some seem possible and viable, and others don't. And some seem possible and viable, and they turn out not to be, sort of thing, or the other way around. They are iffy and so on, and they turn out to be good. For a while, I was with a – I was interacting with a lot of dealers, a lot of different galleries.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah, I noticed that. Is that because you preferred not to have exclusive representation by anybody? You wanted to be flexible?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Kind of, to an extent, to an extent. I just had a sense that being spread out and diversified was a good idea. And I kind of wanted to show in various countries and all that sort of thing, too. I was kind of disregarding the disadvantages to working that way, one of which is that the various dealers will kind of inadvertently work against each other or not work with each other. So as far as anything that builds a career for me, there wasn't much of that. It was kind of thwarted by having so many dealers.

For a while, it seemed to work okay and gave Gail and I an opportunity to go lots of interesting places. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: Did you have difficulty also juggling where you would send your work, everyone maybe being in competition wanting to get the new piece, and you having four different possible destinations for it?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Not really, because I tended to work for shows, so I would have show in London or a show in Italy or something like that. And I would just do a body of work for that show. So it wasn't – nobody else wanted those things, particularly, at that point in time. So it was fairly simple.

MS. RICHARDS: So if you didn't have any long-term commitments, then you wouldn't have the discomfort of telling a gallery that you were leaving?

MR. MCCRACKEN: I don't know. I didn't ever think of that so much. I just had shows and worked with a number of dealers. I never really thought too much of leaving any of them. Although when I went with David Zwirner, that changed everything, and changed it from having an array of dealers and galleries to having just one. And so I did have to leave the various other galleries that would have otherwise been interested in continuing.

MS. RICHARDS: You had a long relationship with L.A. Louver, for example.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: So they never – you never thought of them as being your sole representative?

MR. MCCRACKEN: No, no.

MS. RICHARDS: But you had a long-term – you had many exhibitions.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, yeah. When I worked with a number of galleries, including Louver, I never felt that any one of them was exclusively my main dealer or something like that.

MS. RICHARDS: In your relationships with your dealers, do you get involved in questions of what exhibition you should participate in if you are invited, and who should buy the work, and how often should you have a show, or all those questions that you are engaged in? Or do you leave a lot of that –

MR. MCCRACKEN: Well, kind of. That kind of happened in a natural way, because you tend to show every couple of years with a gallery. So that would more or less work out with most of the galleries I was working with, most of the dealers. And the business of who to sell to, and kind of being a little bit strategic about placing things, and all that sort of thing was something that various dealers did pretty much on their own.

That is one thing that made it a little bit chaotic for me, finally, having a number of people do the same kind of thing, but all differently and with different ideas and kind of getting in each other's way in the process.

MS. RICHARDS: How did your relationship with David Zwirner begin?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Well, I had my first show with him in '97. I had shown – I had a show with Sonnabend, I guess.

MS. RICHARDS: Right, right, in '92.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, yeah. And kind of ended up kind of with no place to go. David approached me, and we started talking.

MS. RICHARDS: You mean, no place in New York, because you still had L.A. Louver in L.A.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Well, yeah, except – yeah, I guess, New York. I really was thinking in terms of a New York gallery and representation and so forth. So anyway, that went on to be a relationship. That was very good.

MS. RICHARDS: And you decided, as you were speaking before about, that you wanted to enjoy the benefits of being represented by one gallery and having everything coordinated and having someone be able to –

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, nobody had really wanted to – seemed to want to do that before.

MS. RICHARDS: For you?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, yeah, before David. It seemed even like a new idea to me. I am not sure. Anyway, it worked out extremely well, in that sense, to be working with him.

MS. RICHARDS: We talked about documenta in '07. And you had – when you had your show at Zwirner in '08, it was filled with multipart pieces. And at that time, I think someone asked you about numbers.

MR. MCCRACKEN: That was the –

MS. RICHARDS: The show at the gallery two years ago, in 2008.

MR. MCCRACKEN: That was the one with many, many –

MS. RICHARDS: Multipart pieces, yeah, yeah, narrow mostly, I think. And someone was talking about numbers. And I was wondering about the significance of numbers, the numbering, the decisions about how many parts a piece would be. Is it purely a visual decision, or are these numbers – do these numbers represent something metaphorically, whether a piece will be a five-part piece or a nine-part piece or whatever, because there are many different variations.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, there is not much rhyme or reason to the numbers that I tend to use. I don't usually mean them to be very meaningful. Some piece maybe has 19 elements. Okay, so what? Well, I kind of liked the number 19, maybe. Actually, I don't think I ever made one with 19. But I just make them like I make them, I guess.

MS. RICHARDS: And maybe even count the number of parts later? I mean, obviously, you know all along.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, or think up a number of elements, because that is often what I do, like whether it is going to be six or seven or nine or whatever, or 10 or whatever. But I don't usually think of them as being symbolic, meaningful aspects to the work that ought to be thought about with a wrinkled brow and that sort of thing.

MS. RICHARDS: You have talked about yourself in the role of a shaman. Could you just –

MR. MCCRACKEN: I have?

MS. RICHARDS: I think so.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Okay. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: Maybe that is wrong. Maybe it was a weak moment or whatever. But – or maybe you haven't, but other people have said that they pictured you in that way. Does that make any sense to you?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, more or less, yeah. In terms of my work and so forth, because as I mentioned, I tend to work in both worlds, you know, where I think of the work as existing in both worlds, the bigger one that we know and the other one that we kind of think we don't know or something like that, which is like what a shaman does, and that kind of thing, too. And I like that aspect of work and angle of being and attempting to kind of live that way as much as one can, you know. In a way, we tend to live only in one world, and we need to live more in both worlds, I think, or two worlds or something like that, or a more full world or reality, than we usually do.

MS. RICHARDS: So you are creating the bridge between the worlds?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Kind of –

MS. RICHARDS: Or the pieces.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Or just attempting to do things that have existence in both spaces or worlds, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: So that, in fact, you have had existence in both worlds. It could act as a bridge to carry people between both worlds.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, right, right, right.

MS. RICHARDS: That is a very high standard to hold your work up to.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, yeah, yeah. It is sort of a transcendental business, I guess. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: So does it matter a great deal to you the circumstance and the environment that your work is placed in? I mean, obviously, every artist cares about the space. But do you have higher requirements or expectations for the kind of mood or atmosphere that your work should be in and should be able to create?

MR. MCCRACKEN: I guess, yes and no. That is an important thing, how a work is shown and what it is shown with and all that stuff. But at the same time, I have always felt that I tried to make works that could go anywhere and be – and get away with it. That doesn't quite work all the time, because what we want are situations that are more ideal and so forth, because more of that is communicated and all that. I kind of tend to go back and forth, and include both in my thinking.

MS. RICHARDS: Switching subjects a little bit. At this point, are there artists who you are particularly close to, in terms of being a friend or mutually admiring each other's work, who live here or in New Mexico, wherever?

MR. MCCRACKEN: I don't think so.

MS. RICHARDS: Are there artists whose work you follow very much, you are very interested in seeing new developments?

MR. MCCRACKEN: I don't think there is – I don't think I do. I think I am kind of awfully self-centered in a way. I just look at my own work. I don't know. I like all art and tend to follow all of it or look at a lot of it and all that. A lot of stuff that is called art I don't like.

MS. RICHARDS: But you are just as likely to be interested in a painting or drawing show as a show of sculpture, for example?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Or ancient art as well as contemporary?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: When you are in a big city, do you seek out the museums and look for particular kinds of work to see?

MR. MCCRACKEN: To an extent, yeah, yeah. I haven't done much of that here this time because I am kind of distracted, but yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: If you go to the Metropolitan Museum [of Art, New York, NY], for example, where would you tend to always go first?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Probably the Egyptian area. Then I walk into the other ones, the Roman or Greek or whatever is first.

MS. RICHARDS: Are there particular pieces in the Egyptian collection that draw you to them?

MR. MCCRACKEN: There might be, but I can't remember exactly what they are.

MS. RICHARDS: You have talked about beauty and the fact that making something beautiful is a very high goal of yours all the time.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Could you talk about that? Why that is? Has it always been, or is that something you have realized more recently?

MR. MCCRACKEN: It has just always been one of the things I hold with a lot of value – as having a lot of value. Humankind needs beauty. That is all. The world needs beauty – not that it doesn't have a whole lot of it already, but the more, the better. I am kind of impatient with art that is markedly ugly or negative or whatever that –

MS. RICHARDS: Cynical.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, right, right. I think that such things really aren't art. Art needs to be – it does need to be beautiful. You can, of course, define beauty in many different ways, not just the usual beauty, but more complicated beauty and that sort of thing.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you feel kind of a kinship with any other artists who you feel have that same pursuit?

MR. MCCRACKEN: I can't think of any at the moment. I should be able to. I can't think of any at the moment.

MS. RICHARDS: That is okay. You have also talked about – sorry, would you like me to pause?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, could you pause –

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah, yeah.

[Audio Break.]

We were talking about beauty. So you could call yourself an idealist, in a sense?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, pretty much, yeah, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Is that a tough position to be in in the art world now? Do you feel isolated in some way, or do you feel there are other artists who also share in this kind of position?

MR. MCCRACKEN: There probably are. I have felt at times – [inaudible] – a little bit because of the fact that I was an idealist. It has been very fashionable to not be too idealish at times. But I just feel – it is all right. I don't really feel outside of things so much because of that.

MS. RICHARDS: Well, actually, my next question is the flip side of that, that you have had tremendous recognition of your achievement over the years. I am wondering how you handle the level of critical approval and being seen as being part of the important developments of your time artistically? Has that ever been difficult to deal with? Some artists have difficulty with that kind of success. But then again, maybe you didn't see it that way.

MR. MCCRACKEN: I wouldn't really call it difficulty. But it has been a little bit surprising to me and sort of a puzzlement or something. And it is very pleasing, too. But it is just something that happened. I don't know.

MS. RICHARDS: Could you identify the moment when you felt that something was different, and you were suddenly considered in a different way historically, and that you were –

MR. MCCRACKEN: No, not really. I guess it hasn't been very long ago, except I am not sure when.

MS. RICHARDS: There wasn't a particular exhibition where it was so important. At that moment, you felt that your work was seen in a different way?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Not really, not really. There were various exhibitions that seemed cool, and things were seeming to get through to people in a nice way and all that. But no one big time or whatever. Maybe other than showing with David Zwirner and having shows like the black show we did in '06, 2006, I think it was. That one seemed kind of auspicious or whatever. I am not sure if it was that much more so than other –

MS. RICHARDS: In terms of critical reception, or when you were making it, you felt that you were doing something that was special?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Both, both. It almost seemed to me you were asking about the reception area. And that seemed to be flowering back then. Maybe it did before then. I am not sure.

MS. RICHARDS: There is more adulation.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: So going to the other part of it, you mentioned when you made it, did you feel that it was something rather extraordinary, that exhibition?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, it seemed – it did seem extraordinary. It was also kind of surprising because with those particular pieces, those black pieces, I made them all different blacks.

In the studio, they were all close together, and the actual studio wasn't much bigger than this place here, with all these columns just sort of stacked together or standing together. And you can't tell what you have got with a resin piece until you are finished with it. You can't see the color or anything until it is all polished, all the way to the end. And when that had happened, I saw that all these pieces were different colors. There was a brown one and a blue one and a red one and so forth, instead of all different blacks. They were too different.

I thought, oh, my God, I haven't done a black show after all. I have done something else, a near-black show. But when they got to the gallery, and they were put in the configurations they were supposed to be in, they operated perfectly. They were all black. You couldn't tell them apart. So I was really kind of surprised and pleased at the same time at how that worked out that way.

MS. RICHARDS: Had it been a longtime goal in your mind to create a black show?

MR. MCCRACKEN: No. I don't know. I don't think so, because I had done that before in various ways. I had done various versions of that type of thing. That one was kind of special and did have something special about it.

MS. RICHARDS: Why?

MR. MCCRACKEN: I don't know. The space was so good, for example. It just seemed to – everything seemed to click right.

MS. RICHARDS: Was there something special in the pieces themselves?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, yeah. The pieces themselves and the show as a whole, which includes the space and so forth.

MS. RICHARDS: So the relationship of the individual pieces, the relationship of the pieces to each other and then within –

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Was there something different that you did when you were building up those blacks that you hadn't done in the past?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Not markedly, not hugely.

MS. RICHARDS: But slightly?

MR. MCCRACKEN: I don't know. I just made different blacks and worked intuitively, as I usually do. [Inaudible] – this color and that color and so forth to see how they come out.

MS. RICHARDS: Does it matter to you that these pieces are now scattered to different places and they are not going to be seen in relationship to each other?

MR. MCCRACKEN: No, because I made them as separate pieces anyway and with the idea that they could go their own separate ways, even though they were shown together. I think as it turned out, the six columns that were in the larger room of the gallery did stay together, even though I hadn't intended that to be a definite fact or case.

MS. RICHARDS: When you get back to the studio, what do you have in mind to do next?

MR. MCCRACKEN: I don't know. I don't know.

MS. RICHARDS: Are you continuing to – would you go back to previous sketchbooks to find ideas? Would you begin new sketchbooks?

MR. MCCRACKEN: I will probably just go into the studio and piddle around until I come up with some idea or something. It depends, too. If I have a show idea going, then the studio doesn't make much difference. I just use it to do what I want to do, which is kind of how I tend to treat studios anyway. I don't really get much inspiration, exactly, from a studio, but rather just use it. I, first of all, get an idea about a show, and then I do what I have to do to make the show.

MS. RICHARDS: Is there some idea in your mind right now that you have been tossing around and thinking

about that is a kernel of the next show?

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah. There is the next show coming up. But I also have ideas for the show after that. But I am not going to say much about them. [Laughs.] You will have to guess.

MS. RICHARDS: Okay. What would you say is your greatest artistic challenge right now?

MR. MCCRACKEN: I don't know. Just make more interesting art, I guess. You know, make additional interesting art, keep making interesting art. I could say, live long enough to do so. But really, I just want to make the best art I can and to keep doing that as long as I can. And to have the feeling of, when doing a show or doing a group of works and so forth, that I am doing actually interesting work, you know, that I myself am involved in and feel is worthwhile doing.

MS. RICHARDS: Is the challenge of that still the same as it has always been? Is it getting easier or harder?

MR. MCCRACKEN: No, it is about the same as it has always been.

MS. RICHARDS: To find a new work.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Yeah, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: What it is going to be.

MR. MCCRACKEN: It might be like a lot of different things, like films and so forth, where you get an idea, and you run with it. It is the most interesting thing possible for quite some time, until you are done with it. And then you go on to the next one, and you do the same thing or similar kind of thing. The next one becomes the most interesting thing possible - [inaudible]. That is a nice feeling to keep doing that.

MS. RICHARDS: Is there anything else you would like to say before we end?

MR. MCCRACKEN: I don't think so.

MS. RICHARDS: Great. Well, thank you very much.

MR. MCCRACKEN: Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

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