



Smithsonian  
*Archives of American Art*

Oral history interview with William  
Christenberry, 2010 March 3-31

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**Contact Information**

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

# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with William Christenberry on 2010 March 3-31. The interview was conducted at Christenberry's studio in Washington, D.C. by Merry Foresta for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

William and Sandy Christenberry 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

MERRY FORESTA: This is Merry Foresta interviewing William Christenberry at the Christenberry studio, 2729 Macomb St. Northwest in Washington, D.C.

SANDY CHRISTENBERRY: Twenty-seven-thirty-nine.

MS. FORESTA: Scratch that—2739 Macomb Street Northwest in Washington, D.C. on March 3rd, 2010 for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. And this is disc one.

Also with us today is Sandy Christenberry, Bill Christenberry's wife. And one of the things that I'd like to start with is by saying that this is an oral history done for a project on American photography of the late 20th century.

And I think it's important to point out that Bill Christenberry is known for a number of things, photography being one of them, and to think about his work in a very holistic way is absolutely essential. So we'll be talking about photography a lot but we'll also be talking about the broader scope of Christenberry's art in all media.

And with that as a starting point, I'd like to start at the beginning, Bill, and wondered if you could just give us some basics of where you were born and a little bit about your family and upbringing.

WILLIAM CHRISTENBERRY: I was born in Tuscaloosa, Alabama on November the 5th, 1936, and went to high school there, and of course on eventually to the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa, the main campus, where I majored in painting, and to some degree sculpture.

The major was painting in those days. It was not photography at all. I don't mean that in a demeaning way to photography; it's just the way it was. But the desire came—I had a desire, as I say, to come to grips with that landscape in which I grew up, the positive and the negative, the dark and light.

And I had a little Brownie camera that Santa Claus had brought my sister and me in the early '40s. It has nothing but a shutter release. And it's called a Brownie Holiday. There are several different kinds of Brownies. The other one is called Brownie Hawkeye, but this is the Brownie Holiday, and you just had a little shutter release.

And it used 127 color film, which was very easy to find then in any drugstore and sometimes grocery stores, almost impossible to find now although I have a source when I need it.

MS. FORESTA: And I'm just going to break in here and, for the purpose of the interview, just let everyone know that Bill is now holding this little Brownie in his hands.

Bill, is this the very same Brownie or is this a much more lately acquired one?

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: No, no, no, this is it.

MS. FORESTA: This is it.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: It was used—"Santa Claus Brownie" I call it. That's not the name of it. They call it Brownie Holiday Flash camera, although I never used a flash. I don't think I ever really had the flash attachment. And I wrote on the back—glued it on here years ago—"Santa Claus Brownie, used from 1960 until 1979."

Then the film became very difficult, if not impossible to find, where it was so prevalent for so long. But I made contact—this is a nice story. It takes 40 minutes.

MS. FORESTA: We've got a lot of time, a lot of digital little—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Somebody put me onto—a reference made to a company up on the Hudson way up above New York City called Film for Classics, film for classic cameras. And I found the phone number and called. And the gentleman's name is Dick Haviland.

And I told him my problem, that I was looking for some old film, fresh film. It had to be fresh. And he said, "Well, I think I can help you." He said, "I spool film for all cameras." In other words, he buys a certain size from Kodak and he can spool it to fit these cameras.

Well, not only did that become exciting, but a real asset because I could resume using this again. But out of it we became very good friends, and he and his wife visited us here. Dick Haviland is his name. So I can still get film for these cameras.

The other camera that I use used a larger format, a 620 film, but I never used it as much, but the little Brownie Holiday Flash, without a flash. I don't think I ever had the flash attachment. And when I use it now— because this is Bakelite, an early form of plastic, I guess. I have to tape it with black electrical tape around the seam after I've loaded the film because sometimes it would leak and ruin your film.

So I'd spend most of my time—because I had, what, eight exposures, 12 exposures on this, with this camera. You were constantly having to take that tape off and reload and tape it back. But it's worked over all these years.

MS. FORESTA: It's worked.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: So I still have that source if I want to use that camera. I have not—in all honesty, I have not used the Brownie—a Brownie in four years because our trips home, just to Alabama—and it's a place where I make pictures, of course—have been limited, for time and other reasons. And I have sad feelings about that, but I don't mean I will not make pictures ever again.

And then, as time went on—

MS. FORESTA: So can I just stop you for a second—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Sure.

MS. FORESTA: —because I just want to be clear that you got this little Brownie when you were a kid, basically, and you started taking photographs with it, or you just kind of—

[Cross talk.]

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Not when you were a child.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: No, no.

MS. FORESTA: No.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: No, not immediately. I probably was in my early teens or so when Santa Claus—maybe earlier than that when Santa Claus brought it to me. And I do believe in Santa Claus.

MS. FORESTA: Still?

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Yes.

MS. FORESTA: Well, good. [Laughs.]

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: I still believe—I hope—hope—I hope he'll be good to me this year.

And, as I said, film was readily available.

MS. FORESTA: And do you remember taking photographs when you were a teenager? No.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: No. Certainly—and if I had to—making photographs of people has never interested me.

MS. FORESTA: Well, that actually was going to be my question. I was going to wonder if you had taken photographs of people then, because I remember you've always said you never photograph people.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: No.

MS. FORESTA: I thought we were about to discover the hidden portfolio here. [They laugh.]

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: No.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: No. No, never had the—I'll say the urge to photograph people, but it was the landscape, and especially vernacular architecture.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: This is when you were in college.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Yeah, mankind's, or the human touch on things. He or she affects things. But the vernacular architecture of that region, of my state, that part of Alabama, the Black Belt—because the soil was very rich and dark and loamy. Cotton was king for so long. And, as I said, the vernacular architecture and the people, although I never photographed the people.

MS. FORESTA: So, describe for me a little bit the area in which you grew up. It was a pretty rural place, wasn't it?

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Well, I grew up in Tuscaloosa.

MS. FORESTA: In Tuscaloosa.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: And Tuscaloosa is a university town. But more than that, it's—Hale County, that's H-A-L-E—I have a dear friend now, a dear first cousin who has the most wonderful Southern accent, and she still lives there. And somebody asked her one time, said, "Where are you from, Teresa?" She said, "I'm from Hale." "What?" "I'm from Hale." And just laughed.

But it's H-A-L-E—Hale County, which was made famous, or infamous, in some category, some places, because James Agee and Walker Evans came there the year I was born. And out of that came a classic book on '30s America called *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. And it was Agee's writing—he was a fellow Southerner from Knoxville. I never met him. He died much too young.

But how he was using words to—it's a prose poem. It's more than that but it's really close to a prose poem. But what he was writing about was the subject matter that I grew up with, a tenant house, the cotton fields, things like that.

MS. FORESTA: Do you remember how old you were when you first encountered Agee and—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: I was in college. I was—when did I start at the University of Alabama— '60?

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Fifty-six.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Wow, that probably—'56?

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: No, I take that back— '54 to '58 for undergraduate, and then your master's—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: A year of graduate—in those years it was one year of graduate study. And—

MS. FORESTA: What was your—what did you— did you go in being an art student?

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Oh, yes.

MS. FORESTA: You applied as an art major.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: I didn't want to be anything else.

MS. FORESTA: At what point in your life did you get that revelation that, I want to be an artist?

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: I can't—it was always with me. And one of the wonderful things, when I look back on it then and now, is that my parents never discouraged me, although my mother would say, often, "Son, how are you going to make a living?" And I still wonder. [They laugh.]

MS. FORESTA: Were there other artists in your family? Did you know any—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Oh, yes. Oh, yeah, but not taught, you know, not schooled or whatever. My Grandfather Christenberry—Daniel Keener Christenberry, D.K. Christenberry, carved his own walking canes. He was not a crippled man. He was bigger, taller, stronger built than I am. And you can see—see, it's even—

MS. FORESTA: It's beautiful.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: And he cut down a little hickory sapling, a little hickory tree, tied it with a rope—bent it,

tied it with a rope for the curve, and then when it dried he shaped it—D.K. Christenberry, Stewart , Alabama—I like to tell people Stewart's not as big as my studio—November, 1942.

MS. FORESTA: Nineteen forty-two.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: And I have two of his canes.

MS. FORESTA: This is just beautiful.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Isn't it beautiful? Look; feel that.

MS. FORESTA: Very solid.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: I'm going to use it. [They laugh.]

MS. FORESTA: Bill, bring your chair up a little bit closer now—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Yes, ma'am.

MS. FORESTA: —because I don't want to miss any of this.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Yes, ma'am.

MS. FORESTA: So, D.A.—D.K.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: D.K.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Yes, D.K.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Daniel Keener.

MS. FORESTA: Daniel Keener.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: And he was—he was a religious man, very religious. Not obnoxiously, you know, in your face kind of thing, but he was Methodist.

And I remember going down to the country from Tuscaloosa, just 30 miles, and spending two weeks at the Christenberry home place and then going, as the crow flies, about two miles over there to where my mother's parents live, the Smith family, and having wonderful experiences with uncles taking me fishing and, you know, picking a little cotton, maybe making 50 cents a day, for the fun of it.

Fond, fond memories of that landscape. So that has stayed with me, and stays with me, over all these years.

MS. FORESTA: And what did your father do for a living?

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: My father, at that time, worked for Hardin's Bakery in Tuscaloosa. They made bread. And then later on he became an insurance salesman for most of—the majority of his adult life.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Dairy farm—Dairy Fresh.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Dairy Fresh milk and ice cream, yes. And then we moved away from Tuscaloosa and then we moved back when was about to enter college. No, I lived with my Grandmother Smith, my mother's family, while I went to the University of Alabama because her house was near there and she was dear Grandmother Smith. And I became an avid, obnoxious fan of the Alabama Crimson Tide athletic teams, still am to this day.

And I went to New York. Well, I taught and then I had a far-sighted friend and teacher—teacher first and then we became good friends with a man named Melville Price. He and his wife came down from New York. And I remember the years, those was difficult, difficult years of integration.

And he was Jewish, and proud of it, but also it was somewhat difficult for him. And I never saw him experience any prejudice or anything, but he was a very sensitive man, a very proud man. But he and I became very good friends.

MS. FORESTA: And this was when you were an undergraduate still.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Yes. We became good friends. And one day, as time went on, I finished undergraduate work and then, as I said, I did my master's there, and then I was asked to teach. And probably if it had not been for Mel, I would have retired there. But he would sort of edge me, you know, a little bit and say, "Yeah, Bill, if

you don't get out of here and see something of the rest of the world, you're going to be forever stuck here."

The sad thing is that he stayed there, he and his wife, and he died much too young of a heart attack, and Barbara moved on.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Barbara moved here.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Barbara moved here, his wife.

MS. FORESTA: Wow.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: But I knew he was right by urging me, insisting really, to get out and see something else.

MS. FORESTA: And describe to me a little bit about what kind of work you were doing then. What was your eye thinking about then?

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Well, at one time early on in school it was total nonobjective Abstract Expressionism, very much influenced by especially de Kooning. I looked at all of the expressionists, but de Kooning—Franz Kline to some degree but mostly de Kooning, all of that gesture and intensity and surface quality.

But I began to question the total nonobjective element, for me—I always want to make that clear—for me. I love nonobjective art.

MS. FORESTA: So, I'm going to break in. And I hope this isn't an offensive Northerner's question, but how did you know about gestural Abstract Expressionism in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, in 1952, whatever?

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Well, I would go to the library a lot. And even in the art department there were faculty members that were interested in what was going on, especially in New York, through catalogues and books and whatever. And it just really piqued my interest.

But after a while, as I said—and some of these paintings still exist and I feel quite strongly about them. And, remember, gesture size—scale was part of the content. I mean, huge things. And Mel and I would order our paint from a paint company up in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in cans, you know, not tubes; cans of it.

MS. FORESTA: And you were painting with acrylics or—oh, these are oils.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: No, no, no, oil paint. And they filled up—because we were taught how to properly ground this canvas. We bought white cotton duck, which was not necessarily an art department—art—it was used for many things, white cotton canvas.

And we put rabbit-skin glue—whew, what a smell—melt that down—or not melt it down but make it liquid—it was crystal—and then make it liquid and brush it on the canvas, and that would make it impervious and seal it off. And it's an age-old thing. It's not much anymore because the coming about of acrylic paint, polymers, changed that dramatically.

But, yes, huge canvases with a lot of gesture and surface quality—initially more towards nonobjectivity, but then I began to question, as I said, that for me, the nonobjective element for me.

So, Santa Claus had brought my sister and me this little Brownie camera. And it was in a drawer at my parents' house, and I took it back with me to school and loaded it with 127 film, which was quite prevalent, as I said earlier, and started making pictures of things in that landscape in which I had grown up, mostly south of Tuscaloosa, Hale County.

And, of course *Praise Famous Men*, the subjects, some of them were still there, that Evans had photographed. But that never really became terribly important to me to trace his steps because eventually he and I became very good friends, but—

MS. FORESTA: But you were aware of him at that point.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Oh, yes. Yes.

MS. FORESTA: And—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: But I was more aware of Agee originally. But, see, that book is one of the prime examples—some people consider it one of the best examples— of a collaboration of a visual artist and a literary artist. They are coequal statements, not separate. The photographs—Walker of course thought that they would be considered illustrative of the text. They're not. They stand on their own.

MS. FORESTA: So if I could just probe a little more deeply about—you're going out to make these photographs, thinking that you were looking for references for your paintings; is that the initial— or was it something—how can we describe it better than that?

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Well, actually, some of the things that Evans had photographed on that trip he and Agee made in '36 still stood. But that was only sort of a curiosity. I never—there may be a photograph or two where that—a photograph of that structure, that old tenant house, but it was never an intention to replicate, in any shape, form or fashion, what they had done.

But in time, the photographs began to be something on their own. And then, I guess after we moved here—well, I knew Eggleston when I lived in Memphis, William Eggleston.

MS. FORESTA: So let's—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: We're jumping ahead a little bit.

MS. FORESTA: Let's not jump ahead because that's an important thing. Let's keep you in the South for a little bit longer.

So you graduate from the University of Alabama—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: In '59 with a master's degree in painting—

MS. FORESTA: Okay.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: —and was asked to stay on to be an instructor. And if it hadn't been for Mel Price and maybe another person or two—well, I knew that he was right that I needed to move on.

MS. FORESTA: And you moved on to—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: To New York City, the big city, this cornpone kid, with just a few dollars in savings. I didn't have any money.

MS. FORESTA: By the way, what did you do to earn money?

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Well, I was getting desperate after a while.

MS. FORESTA: What did you do to earn money, if you can tell.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: I don't know, I was so— I worked in a man's clothing shop for a while, didn't know how to measure anything, and they let me go.

How many jobs did I used to say I had?

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: You had eight different jobs.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Eight different jobs. I wish I could remember each one of them.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: He was a guard at the Museum of Modern Art for one day.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Oh, yeah, I was a guard for a day—a guard for one day at the Museum of Modern Art, and I'll never forget it. They gave me this wool—gray wool suit and a cap.

And what was the exhibition? It was some artist—

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Hieronymus Bosch was where you were stationed.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Yeah, and by the end of the day I was just—because I had to be in those rooms, and it ain't—excuse me—excuse names, but it ain't easy looking at Bosch all day, as much as I admire him. [They laugh.] So I didn't last very long there.

What else did I—I used to—

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: You worked for Bella Fishko.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Oh, Bella Fishko was a gallery dealer [Forum Gallery], and somebody informed me about her. And she was very nice to me, very understanding in a way—probably felt sorry for me.

MS. FORESTA: Did she look at your—did you show her some of your art?

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Eventually I showed her a few things and she was complimentary, of course.

And help me, Sandy.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Norman Vincent Peale's—

[Cross talk.]

MS. FORESTA: Wow.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: I was raised as a Methodist, and I would—going to work, wherever I was working then, down to my little hovel on Leroy Street—Leroy Street and 7th Avenue—I would pass Norman Vincent Peale's Marble Collegiate Church. That's the name of it.

And I knew—I never met Dr. Peale, but it was a Methodist church, and that brought back many memories, although I was not that avid a church person. We went to church but, you know, I could never get up before people to talk and say a prayer or anything. So—

MS. FORESTA: So let's—you mentioned where your studio was. It was down on Leroy Street.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: It's still there, as far as I know. Last—

MS. FORESTA: Was it a room? Was it a—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: No, we shared it with— [laughs]. I shared it with another teacher of mine who had come to Alabama. He was from Chicago, Tom Scott. And he had married a young lady, Barbara.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: No, Jeri.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Jeri, excuse me, who was about my age. He was several years older. And we shared this tiny little place down on Leroy and—what did I say?

MS. FORESTA: On 7th? You said 7th.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Yeah, 7th Avenue. And it was right in the—

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Not far from Houston Street, right?

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Hmm?

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Was it—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Near Houston, but Houston was further over. And—

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: It's very close to—it's by the NYU campus, because when we dropped—when we took Kate up to go to college there, we all trooped over to see the house where Bill and—

MS. FORESTA: I was going to ask you if it still exists.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: I think Sandy breathed a sigh when she saw—we didn't go inside, but it was not a—

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: No, it looked like it was a nice little apartment.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: A nice little apartment.

MS. FORESTA: I'm sure none of us could afford it. [They laugh.]

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: No. I don't know how I did it.

MS. FORESTA: So you didn't live there. It was just your studio? And where—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: No, I lived there.

MS. FORESTA: Oh, you lived there too.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Slept there.

MS. FORESTA: Wow.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Slept there.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: But you told me that you weren't able to make any art that whole time you were in New York.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Oh, well, I would set up to work and nothing would come out. I did some—

[Cross talk.]

MS. FORESTA: So what was it like to be—how old were you, 25, from Tuscaloosa, Alabama, going to New York City. What was it like?

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Twenty-four?

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Twenty-two.

MS. FORESTA: Twenty-two.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Twenty-two. Oh, gosh. That was young. I don't feel so bad—

MS. FORESTA: If we can remember back that far. [They laugh.]

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: That's right.

MS. FORESTA: What can—just to—because I've often wondered what it's like to—because I grew up in New York so I have had the opposite experience.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Well, looking back on it—

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: I take that back. He was older. Yeah, he was closer to, like, 25.

MS. FORESTA: Twenty-five.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Looking back on it, I think—now, I'm not looking for a compliment or a pat on the shoulder, but I wonder how I did it, how I left Alabama in the first place, because, you know, I could have stayed there and I'd be a retired professor emeritus, or whatever, if I'd stayed at the university. But it was the smartest—it was the wisest thing that I ever did.

MS. FORESTA: So what did you fill your days up doing? You just went down to the studio, or did you go to movies or did you go to museums?

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: No, I—now, that's a good question about the movies. The Bleecker Street Cinema was not far from my apartment, and I immersed myself—I mean, I just went—because you could see two great Kurosawa films, or [Sergei] Eisenstein for a dollar or two, or whatever.

MS. FORESTA: Now that's an education in itself.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: That was a very—I would have forgotten that—very important, not for me to become a filmmaker or anything—my love of that kind of thing. Oh, yes. Oh, yes. But I was not any good at selling men's clothes, although I like nice clothes.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: You also had a job working in a gallery where you were supposed to—were you a salesman? He told me he could never figure out the linear feet—[laughs]—for frames and all this kind of stuff.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Oh, the frame shop.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: A frame shop, yeah.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Somebody told me one of the best things a young artist can do is to work in a frame shop because it's— and you can make frames and learn that trade, whatever. I was terrible. I could put them together very well but I couldn't figure out footage very well. I didn't last very long at that. It was kind of sad. We're getting more and more sad here. [They laugh.]

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Yeah, but then there's the final job was when he worked for Time-Life.

MS. FORESTA: There you go.

[Cross talk.]

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: So one day I was really running out of things. I wasn't— looking back on it, I don't think I could do any of this today.

MS. FORESTA: Had you set yourself a goal— I'm going to go for a year—or did you just—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: No, I just didn't know.

MS. FORESTA: You just—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: But I didn't—I don't want to brag on myself. I was amazed and still to this day am amazed that I did any of that, and did it without wallowing and longing for home and whatever.

MS. FORESTA: Yeah.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Really. But one day I was really getting desperate, and somebody said, "Well, you know, Time-Life"—a big skyscraper—"they hire young people to do odd jobs and whatever."

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: You were working for Walker Evans.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Well, yeah, but also I read in some magazine—as I said, *Praise Famous Men* affected me earlier. And I'd read—well, Agee died much too young, but Walker Evans was a senior editor at *Fortune*.

So I went to that skyscraper, and *Fortune* was on—I think I can remember that exactly—the 29th floor. Is that right? That's right. That I can remember. And I walked in and spoke to somebody. I said I was an artist and I was looking for some kind of work. And so—where am I?

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Well, you had decided—the way you told me this many times was that he screwed up his courage and he thought he would go call—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Yeah.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: —Walker Evans, you know, and introduce himself.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Yes, and I did. And it took a lot of courage because I don't—I don't like that done to me and I certainly—I didn't know how to handle it. But I was getting desperate. And he picked up the phone at his office at Time-Life—at *Fortune*.

They had one floor there. And they would do these periodical—he would periodically do essays, photographic essays, for Time-Life. He had to have some—now, Walker didn't have an easy life early on before he was making a living.

And I called and they put me right through to Walker Evans. And I think it was more out of courtesy and kindness and whatever he listened attentively. It didn't take me long to finish what I had to say. And he said, "Young man, I think we should meet. Can you meet me at my office here at Time-Life next Tuesday at 2:00," or whatever, and I said, "Well, yes, sir."

So I go there, trembling, you know, and he receives me in his tiny little office, and photographs are all over the place. And he listens attentively to my interest in Agee and Evans from way back, and especially, well, *Praise Famous Men*.

MS. FORESTA: Well, he must have been pretty impressed that you were—it must have impressed itself on him that you were from Hale County, that you knew about it.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Well, and also that people—I mean, *Praise Famous Men* had not caught on yet, not really. I don't like that term "caught on" but—

MS. FORESTA: People hadn't picked it up yet.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Yeah, he was struggling to make a living himself. And he was— he said—as I said, he would do—periodically do essays for—mostly for *Fortune*. And our friendship grew, and his young wife, Isabelle, who—they were very—what's the word? I didn't see them real often but they would stay in touch.

MS. FORESTA: So he gave you a job?

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: He helped get me a job, yeah—yeah, filing pictures in the photo collection. And you had access to all these files from the time Time-Life began. Fantastic.

MS. FORESTA: That must have been pretty amazing.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Yeah, but you had to be sure you put them back in the right place because they were all by the system, you know? You couldn't make a mistake.

So, how many months was I there? I can't remember. It was quite a while. I was still—

MS. FORESTA: Looking at pictures, really being—were you ever impressed that there were all these thousands and millions of photographs in the world in these filing drawers?

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Just think what it's like now.

MS. FORESTA: Yeah.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: But of course now things can be digitized, right?

MS. FORESTA: Right. But still, the millions—I mean, just how many of them there were.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: And you could buy—not a print from Evans' hand itself, but, you know, a prep from the original negative disc [ph] for a few dollars, not from him but from Time-Life and *Fortune*.

MS. FORESTA: So you've made mention of the fact that during this time in New York, your first time in New York, you have this studio but you didn't really produce any work.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Nothing would come out. I had never—

MS. FORESTA: You don't think it was these millions of photographs, do you, that had some kind of—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: I don't know what it was—I agonized over that, truly, and it was—because I've always thought of myself as a diligent worker, hard worker, believing in work. I come out here sometimes and—I usually work but sometimes I just come out here and study—study effects. You know what I mean.

It's not always—you're not always busy. Sometimes I nod off and—[They laugh]—Sandy comes out and scares me and I wake up. She's very good. She's wonderful. She's beautiful and wonderful.

And so, how did that happen? Somebody in Memphis—where was it that they got in touch with me about a teaching job?

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Bob Gelinas.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Yeah.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Wasn't it Bob Gelinas? But you also were having some eye problems.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Yeah, see, I ruined my right eye in an accident when I was 14. And I wasn't making enough money, and my parents certainly were not poor but I couldn't call back or write and that kind of—well, so, I was having to have some eye treatment on my right eye.

And so, things were—you know, I look back on it, and even talking about it— [laughs]—I don't know how I did it—I don't know how I survived. I'm so fragile now, right?

MS. FORESTA: Well, that must have been pretty scary to have your one good eye starting to—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Yeah.

MS. FORESTA: —have these problems.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Well, it wasn't his good eye. He was having some work—wasn't there a therapist who was trying to fit you with a contact lens?

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Yeah.

MS. FORESTA: Oh.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Yes.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Well, I don't know if this is worth what we're talking about, but when I was a paper boy back in Alabama in this small town—did I tell this story or not?

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: No.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: The papers came—this is not in Tuscaloosa but Clanton—Clanton, Alabama. And the papers came from Birmingham, 30 miles to the north, by truck and dropped off in bundles. And this friend of mine and I had to be there before dawn on Sunday morning. We never went to sleep on Saturday night most of the time.

And then picked up those papers, took them into the room. And when I put that bundle of papers, you know, they would press like this. And I leaned over—oh, it's not quite as high as this—and the wires, when I cut it, it sprang back up—

MS. FORESTA: Oh.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: —and went right in my right eye. Well, it hurt like you know what but I didn't—I tried not to make anything of it. It was not bleeding. Vitreous humor was coming out but not the blood. And it got to—in a little while it was just so painful I had—I had to call my parents and wake them up. And I left my friend to deliver them by himself, but that was not impossible.

And the next morning, a few hours later, I woke up and was vomiting and a fever and very inflamed eye. And there was only an ophthalmologist in that little town. And he met us at his office, and he looked at it and he said, "I want you all to get this young man to Selma"—which is about 40, 35 miles—40 miles away—"immediately." And it was scary.

And when that—more of a specialist there—said, "I'm calling Birmingham," University of Alabama, Birmingham, which has a very good eye hospital there. And they started pumping me full of penicillin and all those things to try to save the eyeball—try to save the eye. And they were able to.

But then the wire had gone right into the pupil, right into the dark part. They stopped the leakage but then it took a long good while before they could really assess how much use I would have of it. So, without—like, right now you wouldn't believe what I see. It's absolutely beautiful. I should— [inaudible]—went in this direction—21st century—is this the 21st?

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: [Laughs.]

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Monet, late water lilies—

MS. FORESTA: It could have gone that way.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: But you're there but I have no idea who you are. All the colors merge. It's beautiful, your hand with your dark dress. But I have no idea who you are. Beautiful colors.

MS. FORESTA: Wow.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: But they saved it. And they thought for a while, after a long recovery, that I'd be able to wear a lens, a contact lens, but I couldn't because the eye had drifted—the muscles had reacted. So, as I said, if I had the contact lens on, which I can't tolerate, you would have two heads. [They laugh.]

MS. FORESTA: So this was what they were doing in New York, and you just ran out of money and—

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Yeah.

MS. FORESTA: —time and energy, but—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Yeah.

MS. FORESTA: —you had gotten a call from somebody in Memphis. You said the neighbor—

[Cross talk.]

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: I think it was Bob Gelinas.

MS. FORESTA: Bob Gelinas.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: If I recall correctly, that's what Bill told me, yeah.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: He said it was a teaching job. And, ironically, one of my best friends, Peter Thomas, the same thing happened with him.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Later. You got him that job.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: And I got him a teaching job. He got that job.

But I went to Memphis, and that's, as I said, where I met Sandy. And I was productive in my studio. It was the old Southern Plumbing Company. We did a Happening. Sandy was—that was our first date.

MS. FORESTA: I want to hear this story, but I am going to change the tape now. So hold on one second.

[Audio break.]

MS. FORESTA: Now recording disc two.

We are going to pick up where we left off, with Bill talking about moving from New York City to Memphis to start teaching in graduate school.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: And Memphis, it was then—

MS. FORESTA: How many courses did you have to teach, by the way?

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Oh, I taught drawing and painting and sometimes sculpture. I say sometimes because sculpture, if you don't—I don't weld—most of my sculpture was carved wood, but technically I didn't know a lot about—well, certainly would not know a lot about the techniques today that are being employed in the sculpture department, but it was mostly drawing and painting. My first love, to this day—my primary love is drawing. It really is.

MS. FORESTA: So, just to clear up, so you brought back nothing from New York in terms of your own artwork. You brought back a lot of experience, obviously.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: And it bothered me. It bothered me that—

MS. FORESTA: Not even any drawings?

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: It bothered me because I'd never had a dry period or a period when I didn't produce something, i.e. drawing, painting or whatever. But it ended up being that year there—a tremendously important year in my life, a formative year, because I was going to museums, although that job with the Museum of Modern Art—at least I remember what show it was. It was so depressing—what artist it was. I mean, it wasn't—I'll think of it in a minute.

MS. FORESTA: Bosch? You were—Hieronymus Bosch?

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Hieronymus Bosch. He—but I just could not—to this day, if you and I went to a museum I might say, "Merry, you go your way, I'll go mine; we'll meet at the reception area later," because I don't tarry. I don't—[makes whooshing noise]—stay long. I never have.

But—where were we?

MS. FORESTA: So here you've arrived in Memphis after a year, almost, in New York; nothing to show in terms of your own work except that you're kind of full of something. Do you feel like you're going to—so now you're going to teach, and you're teaching painting and sculpture—maybe sculpture sometimes, painting and drawing.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Yeah.

MS. FORESTA: And do you have your own studio again—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Yes.

MS. FORESTA: —at the university?

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Yes. They afforded us very nice studios. There's a beautiful—well, not the state campus wasn't beautiful. Memphis state—now the University of Memphis, but it was a much smaller university. But I—

MS. FORESTA: So describe—can you describe to me a little bit about just what it was like. Was it an active—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Well, I thought Memphis—I thought Memphis—not ever having been there before in my life I thought, well, shoot, that might be very interesting, you know? Not too far from Mississippi and where Mr. Faulkner—from Oxford, Mississippi. And right across the river is West Memphis, Arkansas, and all of that. And I thought it might be somewhat exciting.

Actually, "exciting" is not the right word. It might fit me. And I was very, very productive, because I didn't have—I taught fulltime but I didn't have—well, I got out three days a week, and that was really wonderful. And it was very, very productive, especially in terms of painting.

MS. FORESTA: Do you remember thinking—can you actually cast yourself back and think, okay, I can work here? Did you have that kind of—because you could start to work again. Did you start with drawings?

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Always with drawing. Remember that wonderful line from [Katsushika] Hokusai, the great Oriental artist? He wrote in his sketchbook—or signed in his sketchbook, "Hokusai, old man mad about drawing." I love that. I qualify. [They laugh.]

MS. FORESTA: So you started drawing again, and that kind of—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: I don't mean that that hiatus or that dry period—it bothered me because I've always been very productive. I don't mean in terms of numbers, but staying with my work.

Is that straight vodka? Thank you.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Sparkling water.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Thank you so much.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: You're welcome.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: But I've always been diligent, even if I—I come out here sometimes after supper and I may do some work, I might not, but I sit here and be in the presence of the work and thinking about it.

MS. FORESTA: So, was the art department in Memphis, was it kind of a—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Deadly dull.

MS. FORESTA: Deadly dull? Deadly dull. Well, we won't mention any names, then. [They laugh.]

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: All waiting on retirement.

MS. FORESTA: So you were the young—you were the young Turk in this group.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Yeah, I think some of them resented me because—and I don't mean this egotistically—because I was so energetic. I was so productive.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Well, then Peter came too—Peter Thomas.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Then I have a friend, pretty much a lifelong friend, who was also from Tuscaloosa, and he was married—where were they living when I called and told them about the teaching job?

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: They were—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Anyway, it doesn't matter, but—

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: They were in Washington, D.C.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: That's right. And I said, "This teaching job is coming open and I'd like to recommend you." And I had some sense that they wanted to—they didn't have a family then.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Addice was pregnant with Gethin.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Yeah, OK. But anyway, he took the job and—

MS. FORESTA: So, besides—despite this deadly dull art history department, was there an art scene in Memphis?

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: More music.

MS. FORESTA: Music.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Oh, yeah, heavy—I mean, good—I never attended much of it, but, as I say, it was right across the river from Arkansas, and you had all these bands and whatever coming in.

MS. CHRISTENBERRY: Well, of course, Elvis Presley was in Memphis. There was Sun recording studios—

MS. FORESTA: And this was the—

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Stax records

[Cross talk.]

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Yeah, Johnny Cash.

MS. FORESTA: So there must have been a sense of—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Johnny Cash. Yeah, there was a fervor in terms of music but not in terms of official art.

MS. FORESTA: But yet there were some exciting times in Memphis, wasn't there? At what point did you encounter Eggleston and—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Oh, wow. Neither Bill—not Bill or I can remember our first meeting, which is kind of unusual. It is for me, not so much for Eggleston. [They laugh.] I don't mean that in a demeaning way. But we got to talking, and he was heavily, heavily into Cartier-Bresson's "the decisive moment," and all black-and-white photography.

And as our friendship grew, he saw the little Brownie snapshots. I am not saying that they influenced him, but they were always color and he began—

MS. FORESTA: They were always color?

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

MS. FORESTA: Ah.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: My pictures were always color. And in fact, I'll have to digress for a moment—not digress. Oh, gosh, how do I tell the story?

So George Hemphill, a few weeks ago—okay?

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Don't ask me. Merry might want to—yeah.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: George Hemphill [Hemphill Fine Arts, Washington, DC] wanted to find—and, by the way—

[Audio break.]

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: So neither Bill or I can remember how we first met, but we remember—I was—

MS. FORESTA: Is he older or younger than you?

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: He's a couple of years younger than me.

MS. FORESTA: And was he a student at the time?

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: No, no, no, no.

MS. FORESTA: No?

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: He's never been a student. [Laughs.]

MS. FORESTA: This is why—I was asking this question because—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: No, no, no.

MS. FORESTA: —I didn't think he'd ever been a student.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: No way.

MS. FORESTA: But he liked to hang out at the university.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Well, no, he liked to hang out at my studio.

MS. FORESTA: Ah, he was at your studio.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: We became really good friends, and his wife, Rosa. They were dear friends. We were

very fond of Rosa too. And eccentric—wonderfully eccentric people from a wealthy delta family—and I don't mean that begrudgingly—families.

And we started—Bill and I one day, we will never forget, started talking about photography. And I knew he had been making pictures but they were black and white, so much in the tradition of Bresson, "the decisive moment," as I said earlier. And I mentioned that I had made, over time, some color snapshots, and he asked to see them.

Now, I'm not saying here now that this—I don't want this to be on the record as not—we don't know how this worked out. I'm not saying that I was—anyway. I was making color snapshots and he was very much interested and intrigued by those—processed at the local drugstore. And, by the way, this is—this can be on the record if you want to.

So a few weeks ago George Hemphill came here. And I take pretty good care of my things. It's just my nature—my shoes, my hair.

MS. FORESTA: Your wife. [They laugh.]

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: You may have to ask her about that.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Carry on, dear.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Where was I?

So, George came here and I showed him—I don't know how it came up—and from that room, the box, the original drugstore process Brownie, which are in mint condition. They've never been exposed to light. That's just the way it was.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: In these two big black binders.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: And George starts pulling some of them out, taking them out. And he said he was going to do an exhibition and that's what he wanted—I found out at that moment it's what he wanted to show. Lo and behold—you pick up the story now.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Well, George took the binders back to the gallery because they wanted to see them, and then they made records of them, front and back. And then he said that he would like to have an exhibition—they were planning a show that needed more time.

So he decided to have a group exhibition, and Bill was one of the artists. He wanted to show some of the vintage—the original Brownies. So he picked out a group. I think they have, like, 13 in the exhibition and another 11. And then he said he wanted also to take them to AIPAD [Association of International Photography Art Dealers] this year.

So, I think Bill didn't realize that George was actually going to sell them. [They laugh.]

MS. FORESTA: Uh-oh.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: So, anyway, we've since had this discussion about, well, how long do you hang on to these things, you know? I mean, wouldn't it be better to let some of them go, as we decided to let them go and have some control over them instead of—Bill keeps wanting to—I mean, he saves things for me and the children, but—

MS. FORESTA: And I think that's a great idea.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Well, it is to a certain extent.

[Cross talk.]

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: —one time, and that's a change. I mean, I'm not changing my opinion. I say this is the way I—these are drugstore—

[Audio break.]

MS. FORESTA: I'm going to take a brief moment here to say that we've taken a little detour and we're now looking at some binders of Brownie photographs that Bill made in—from when, Bill, did you start making these, in the—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: I think the earliest year is '62.

MS. FORESTA: So '62 through the '70s? Is that what's in these binders?

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: That's '79, I think.

MS. FORESTA: And Bill is pointing out that in some cases, these images—and we're sitting in a studio, by the way, that has an entire wall full of fabulous found signs on metal—Coca-Cola signs and Pepsi, and Royal Crown Cola signs, and Wayne Feeds, and a Nehi sign that I just looked at a Brownie which has that sign on the wall of one of the buildings.

But, Bill, my question to you as we look through this book, is when you were making these Brownies, did you think of them in a way of—were you collecting the things that were in the photos? How were you using photographs? How did the photographs change the way you went about making art?

Or did they just become a kind of activity in and of themselves? Were they memory pieces? Did you think of them as reference points, starting points for making paintings and drawings? How did they originally start?

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Not starting points but certainly memory, because this landscape obviously has changed so dramatically over the years—the architecture, the vernacular architecture. The use of signage—television changed [inaudible] advertising dramatically, maybe for the best. Who knows? I don't know.

See, here's the Nehi sign on the brick wall.

MS. FORESTA: Yeah. I can verify it's the very same sign that I see hanging in front of me.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: That's right.

MS. FORESTA: So—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Here are some fantastic pictures made in England.

MS. FORESTA: So this has sort of an interesting reference to that what is now talked about in critical theory as the indexicality of photographs, that the photograph comes to stand for the thing itself, and yet sitting before me now I have the thing itself and I have the photograph of the thing.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Right.

MS. FORESTA: So, did you have any—how did the two things reverberate in your head of collecting both of those things? Because I have a sense that you collected the photograph—you collected the thing as a photograph before you collected the thing.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Yes.

MS. FORESTA: Is that right?

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Yes, but sometimes, depending on the situation—i.e. security—I would—

MS. FORESTA: Get the thing.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: —get the snapshot and then appropriate that sucker right there. Now, I've done—excuse me. I mean, I think I'm a pretty decent human being, and shy and retiring, I think, but I'll do anything to get a good sign. [They laugh.]

MS. FORESTA: So maybe it doesn't matter, but I'm just wondering if, then, these become memory notes. Are they, in a way, a visual diary of what you were seeing and where you were going, and the things that were important and you felt might disappear before you got there the next time?

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: I can't argue with that, but I did not understand—had no way of knowing that, in time—this whole landscape has changed so dramatically. For example—I'm just going to see—this is unique. Well, not unique in this book but it's—this is the original Brownie snapshot of, I think, one of my stronger, better images of Sprott Church. And it was processed at the drug store. And see that pebbly surface—

MS. FORESTA: Yeah.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: —which I never liked, now look on the back. See, and I would stamp it "original print."

And there's a vertical view made on the same day. And when George took some of these and took them over

there—I love this little symbol of—is it a—an animal running across there, the symbol of the processing.

MS. FORESTA: Oh, yeah.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: See that?

MS. FORESTA: The fox.

Why is there this tape up at the top? Were these in a larger book?

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: That's because I had put them—they were in a book. And of course, I should have known better. Of course that's not a big deal now, but I didn't stick them in there with masking tape. I did not, because paper tape is better for them.

MS. FORESTA: So, I know that in the case of Sprott Church and some of your other subjects, you went back again and again to photograph them using different format cameras.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Sometimes, and sometimes I would go back with the same—you know, with the Brownie over a period of years and record it again. And sometimes it's much later with the big camera.

Then it would have—I think there is a Sprott Church, but the church has changed so much. They took the two bell towers down, the people there. It's not nearly as interesting today as it used to be.

MS. FORESTA: So, a question that I have during this time—and this gets us back to your years—your earlier years in an academic setting. And, looking at things, were you aware—you must have been because people were mentioning Cartier-Bresson to you—of a kind of Surrealism of the street that certainly was becoming more published around that time, and especially in America.

Did you have a sort of sense of this kind of Surrealism, though mostly Surrealism was about the city and not about the country?

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Yeah. No.

MS. FORESTA: Not at all?

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: I think you see that— what I think you're driving at—I think you see that more in Eggleston's work.

MS. FORESTA: Well, I was—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: And sometimes—and I don't believe—these are not derogatory words— the literalist things. Where is that—I had a rare one worth a lot of money, a rare first printing of *The Red Ceiling* [William Eggleston, 1973].

MS. FORESTA: No, it's—well, I was—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: That was the kind of picture that I could not make. I mean, it's just not in me.

MS. FORESTA: But what I was thinking about more were the photographers maybe that the Surrealists like, people like Atget.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Yeah, that sounds like [Eugène] Atget, certainly.

MS. FORESTA: And maybe the way Berenice Abbott sort of looked at New York City after she came back from Paris and was looking at changing New York, and these small tenement buildings that were about to be torn down and big skyscrapers taking their place, and sort of sense that Atget may or may not have had consciously but Berenice certainly did, of this ability to capture some thing that was changing before your very eyes.

It seems to be that there's something that's so strong to me about this idea that these images hold onto it.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: These images.

MS. FORESTA: These images, especially these Brownies, in a way. They seem—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: And the size of them.

MS. FORESTA: Yeah, and the size of them scale.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: They do not, as I said earlier, tolerate enlargement—too soft—an image too soft, but the size is just right.

MS. FORESTA: And you can accumulate—I mean, looking at them in this notebook format that you have—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Yeah.

MS. FORESTA: —there is just a sense of place in their accumulation which is very strong to me. But, you know, you must have had a pile of them after a while, and then maybe you looked at them that way too.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: And some of them were repetition paintings but not—again, not photorealistic [inaudible]

MS. FORESTA: So you would find an idea, maybe first realized in a Brownie—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: But then—oh, you had the floor. I'm sorry.

MS. FORESTA: So maybe first realized in a Brownie that you might say, "I could paint this," or "I can make a building out of this," or, "I can do something more with this."

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: That really came about through the Sprott Church picture, and it had to do with the nature of the camera lens and where the church was set in that landscape. It's sense of smallness that did affect, somehow, me in going—making a move to sculpture.

Now, hold on a second. That goes in behind.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: In terms of the early work—

MS. FORESTA: Don't trip on this cord, Bill.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: I see it.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: For the paintings of the tenant houses and the graveyard, wasn't it the other way around, that you wanted to paint that first and then you took photographs of—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Yeah.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: —buildings and sites that interested you?

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Right. That's a point—good point.

Now, there's this collector—I guess you've met him, I don't know, Dr. Pointer [ph]—who's been waiting for years —[inaudible]. Maybe we can edify this or amplify it or talk about it, whatever, when he comes. He wants the building construction. I call these building constructions. I don't have one here now. You've seen them. Those two sculptural—the white and the— those are things based on other things.

But see the scale, what the Brownie camera lens did—let me see the front of that one more time. Yeah, it's hard to believe that that and this are the same building. What's the date on that? Look on the back.

MS. FORESTA: Seventy-nine.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: This is 1990. How it's changed.

MS. FORESTA: Oh, my goodness. It is the same.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Yeah, it's—it ends up being called—this is called the Underground Clubseries. And then the very last one that Bill has I think is called *Barry's* [ph] *Place*, and it's blue.

MS. FORESTA: Wow.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Painted not a sky blue—

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: No, it's blue blue.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Blue.

But this collector—one of the reasons George is coming down—well, anyway, he's been waiting on a building construction, one of the more little buildings, for years. I mean, he's getting edgy and George is getting—George is getting upset. [They laugh.] So I said, "George, if you come over we'll whip this out this afternoon, I

mean the whole thing. You know, go look at that."

So I dug these out because I wanted to see maybe—maybe prompt an idea. I like the idea of maybe trying to build that without the kudzu.

MS. FORESTA: You know, you could do one that's like one of those Chia Pets where you put the grass seed in and it— [they laugh]—

[Cross talk.]

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: —sprouts coming out.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: No, I'll just wait until—

MS. FORESTA: Sorry.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: I'll just wait.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Good idea, Merry.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: I think I need to go in the house for a while. [They laugh.]

MS. FORESTA: Sandy and I will finish up the interview—

[Cross talk.]

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: This is called *The Shack*.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: See, now I really like that. You have not done *The Underground Club*, have you, as a building construction?

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: No, but I was thinking about this. But look at this. So someone probably—well, somebody painted over there, but look at over here on the back wall.

MS. FORESTA: Yeah.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: "Get back at the shack." [Laughs.] Isn't that great?

MS. FORESTA: Does that look like 1979 or what?

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: You know, you might consider doing that for Marc Selwyn's exhibition. You're doing something else for Dr. Pointer. Because there's a whole—

MS. FORESTA: I love—the thing I love about this one is that in this disc, somebody's painted this building.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Yeah.

MS. FORESTA: So you've got it—it's just—

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Yes.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: —very—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: I made this one—

MS. FORESTA: —a picture within a picture.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: I don't know who owns it, but I always like that: *Night Spot*.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Oh, yeah, I love—Dick Belgerowns that.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Dick Belger owns that?

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Yeah.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: We need to—I need a record of these things.

MS. FORESTA: So you took these Brownies— and, let's see, I think where our story was going was that Eggleston saw them and, lo and behold, he might have started making color pictures around that time.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: No, well, we have to be careful with that.

MS. FORESTA: We won't make that direct connection.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: No, because I think it was—

MS. FORESTA: But you guys were pals. You guys—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Very, very good friends— very good friends.

MS. FORESTA: And—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: We never really—well, one time we went out and made pictures together, you know, at the same time, both with my Brownie and with his—

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Yeah, you went down to Mississippi.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: —his Leica. And he—he's very—he can be very almost intrusive with that—that's the wrong word, but if he likes something he'll go get it. Well, one time he got scared and he took off running— [laughs]—running because he was afraid somehow I was going to—I was going to upset him so he hurriedly came back to the car. Let's put it that way. He just—

MS. FORESTA: So you would say that your eye—your separate eyes are attracted to different kinds of things.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Yeah, I don't think artists—certainly I shouldn't try to articulate—there's strong sentiment in most of my work—indeed, at least for me, profound feeling of time and time passing. And that's the reason place is so important.

Where's that wonderful book that was done, *Of Time and Place*?

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Tom Southall's catalogue.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Tom Southall's catalogue, yeah. Well, I don't know if the book is wonderful but I always like the title, *Of Time and Place*.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: It's a good catalogue.

MS. FORESTA: Isn't it?

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: It was an exhibition of Tom and Bill and Walker's work at the Amon Carter Museum.

MS. FORESTA: Yeah, it was a—that was a fantastic show.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Well, see, that palmist building goes way back in my youth, the way it was—in my youth we would pass it going to a grandparent's house.

MS. FORESTA: So you saw this building when you were a kid.

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

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Oh, yeah, but that—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: But the palmist hand wasn't in there at that time, in my youth.

MS. FORESTA: Was it always an abandoned building?

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: No.

MS. FORESTA: No, the palmist had to have been there.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: It was a country store—

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: It was a country store to—

[Cross talk.]

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Bill's dad used to deliver bread there.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: My father, after World War—during and right after World War II, drove a bread truck

through that part of Hale County and Tuscaloosa. And why they put that—there was no—there's burglar bars there but the glass is all missing where the palmist sign is. But I was finally able to appropriate that properly. I didn't have to steal it.

MS. FORESTA: Yes, let the record show that the palmist sign now resides here on the wall—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Right. [They laugh.]

MS. FORESTA: —above us in the studio.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Well, a show was—was it a Smithsonian show that was traveling for so long?

MS. FORESTA: Well, didn't you have some in that Corcoran show way back when in the '80s?

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Yeah.

MS. FORESTA: You had some signs in there. Walter put those signs there.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Oh, yeah, that sign was actually lent for that exhibition.

MS. FORESTA: Exhibition.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Yeah.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: And then it had to be returned.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: You all are remembering better than I am. [They laugh.]

Have you ever seen this one, Merry? Sandy and I made a lot of money off that with Absolut Vodka.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Would that we had.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: It did appear in a little book that they did of artists—Absolut Vodka. What I did is—that's my sculpture, of course. And I made, the gasoline pump. And it's—you know, it's about like this, this front façade. And I had this—this is what Absolut Vodka did.

Oh, when they called me I had no idea what I would do for that. So I said, "Well, I'll try to do something." And I sent it up there and they called several days later and they were ecstatic. "Oh, we have never had anything quite like this"—Absolut Vodka. But I just hand-painted on—

MS. FORESTA: Sure.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: —another piece of paper a vodka bottle as if it were weathered and faded, and sent that to them and they loved it.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: But we didn't get to see it.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: No.

"Here is your original back once again. Thank you so much for working with us on this project. American Photo, 1633 Broadway, New York."

MS. FORESTA: Let's see.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: "May-June 1993."

But, oh, so they said, "Oh, we think it's terrific but would you do one thing for us?" And I was waiting—

MS. FORESTA: That's always—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: —waiting for the bomb, yeah, and he dropped it on me: "Could you just sort of paint-out the word Pepsi?"

MS. FORESTA: You know, I was actually going to ask you if you had to do that. [They laugh.]

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Yeah.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: So I said, "Well, okay." So I just took a little white paint. Anybody can recognize the Pepsi sign.

MS. FORESTA: Yeah.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Oh, lordy.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Competition.

MS. FORESTA: So—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: How is that book, do you think—when is that book dummy going to be coming?

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Tomorrow.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Tomorrow.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: FedExed to me.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: A new book on my— from 35-mm film work. Aperture [Foundation, New York, NY] is doing that.

MS. FORESTA: This is the one of the slides, right?

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Yeah.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Yeah.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Kodachrome.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: "Kodachrome." "Kodachrome." Who sang that?

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Paul Simon.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Paul Simon.

MS. FORESTA: What was I going to say? Where were we? We were in Memphis. [They laugh.]

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: We've gone all over.

MS. FORESTA: We were in Memphis—

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: We're going all over the place.

MS. FORESTA: —with Bill Eggleston, but it seems to me that I am remembering a story of the Memphis art scene that had to do with some Happenings that you cooked up—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Well, when I went—when I went there from New York—

MS. FORESTA: —which—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: —I was full of a lot of things I had experienced in New York, mostly good. I never really was a big fan of Happenings. I didn't—

MS. FORESTA: Had you gone to any in New York?

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: One or two, yeah.

MS. FORESTA: Do you remember whose?

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: I'm trying to—I used to remember that.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: I thought you said you had sort of accidentally run into Jim Dine's.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Oh, yeah, Jim Dine, yes. But, see, that year, '62, was an interesting year in American art history—contemporary art history because that was a real transition time, not just that one year but in that period, from Abstract Expressionism to Pop Art, and it didn't interest me at all at that time, the Pop Art, because I was an expressionistic painter.

But, looking back on it, what I was going—I went to a Happening one night—what I was seeing and being a little bit bewildered or stumped by—I kept it to myself that I was bewildered by it, but that's where it started, that part of it.

MS. FORESTA: Would you, by the way, when you were in New York, run into—did you hang out with a bunch of artists, young artists like yourself, or were you sort of more alone with just a couple of—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: More alone.

MS. FORESTA: Working at these various jobs.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Trying to keep myself— looking back on it, I don't know how I did it.

MS. FORESTA: So I was just wondering how word would pass that you would—I mean, that people would get together, I guess just—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Well, right up the street from my place on Leroy Street was 7th Avenue was where a lot of those Happenings were going on, over on Bleecker. I mentioned earlier Bleecker Street. It was heavy—a lot going on.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: It was all in the Village there.

MS. FORESTA: Yeah.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Yeah.

MS. FORESTA: So you thought you'd bring a little bit of this to Memphis. [They laugh.]

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Yeah. Yeah, I was accused of bringing this realist movement to Memphis, Tennessee. But that's where I met Sandy. And the first Happening—one of the first Happenings we did, it was some film, some 35-mm, and it's—

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: It was 8-mm film, I think. I didn't—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Didn't we have it transferred to—

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Yeah, Stanley [Staniski] transferred it to—

[Cross talk.]

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: We ought to look at that sometime. Next time you come over we'll put you to sleep with that thing.

MS. FORESTA: You know, I've seen that, but a long time ago—

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Yeah.

MS. FORESTA: —before it was transferred, so it was a bit spotty but—

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: It still is.

MS. FORESTA: —I still remember this.

So you should tell the story, but I don't know whether you want to talk about it as the first Surrealist Happening in Memphis, or you want to talk about it as the first date you had with Sandy.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Well, I think I'll go with the latter right now if I want to have any dinner tonight. [They laugh.]

No, we still have a—and the film, she doesn't know the camera as well. We mount up on the rooftops, see.

MS. FORESTA: So who was involved in this? You were.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Eggleston was involved.

MS. FORESTA: Eggleston.

[Cross talk.]

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: —with the technological part. And he and his wife Rosa, and a young man named Alex Chilton, who became famous for a short time with—

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: He still is. He's a very famous musician.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: —with a group called the Box Tops.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: When he was a teenager he had the Box Tops.

[Cross talk.]

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: —song "The Letter?"

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Yeah.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: "Getting on a jet plane." Anyway.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: It's a great song.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: And that—well, we had a little group in Memphis, seriously. And the art department faculty, especially the dean of the chairmen—

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Couldn't care less.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: —"Gee, what is all that tomfoolery, you're all doing"—

MS. FORESTA: I'm interested—and we don't need to dwell on it, but your comment that it was Eggleston who had the technical expertise to run the movies, or to think about it being on film, or whatever.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Oh, yeah, Eggleston knows a lot about that kind of thing.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: But he wasn't involved in the filming at all.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: No.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: It was Peter Thomas and Arthur Nave that did that.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Yeah, but Eggleston was—

MS. FORESTA: Could you say those again? Peter—

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Peter Thomas—our friend Peter Thomas, who—or was Bill's—they went to the University of Alabama and have known each other a long time. And Peter came to Memphis. And then Peter eventually ended up back here in D.C. as the dean of the Corcoran school, and then was head of the Federal Reserve Board [art department] for a while.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Well, he—

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: But—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Go ahead.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: And Arthur Nave. They were all—they all taught in the art department. And Arthur was an architect.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: But Peter—[...] Peter was looking—they were going to have their first child, weren't they?

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Well, that's when you first got to Memphis, but we're talking about the Happening now.

MS. FORESTA: So you decided to set it up. You decided that it was a performance and it needed to be filmed. So you set up—how many cameras did you have?

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: We had two, one on the— well, I went on the rooftop holding the commode.

MS. FORESTA: So before we get to that—so describe the performance. What happened?

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Okay, so imagine this rundown building where my studio was. And I had a little—pied-a-terre, what do you call it?

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Apartment.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Apartment.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: His studio, the old Southern Plumbing Company, was across the railroad tracks from the

Memphis State campus. And Bill had this big space in the building. That's what he used for his studio. And then in the back he had these little living quarters.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Thank goodness my dear mother never saw those living quarters. She would have died. They were neat.

MS. FORESTA: They were very neat. I'm sure they were. I can't imagine anything that you've ever done isn't neat.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: I'll explain, but I had to go somewhere to take a shower because I didn't have a shower.

MS. FORESTA: So this performance happens by your studio—in front of your studio.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Okay, imagine this unpaved driveway between my studio—

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Like our driveway here.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: —and an old building here, old [Macon ?—inaudible] house, just in that separation. And, everybody has something to drink. And I said, "Okay, now it's time for you all to come out into the alley space. And I'm going to be gone"—I told my date, this sweet little lady, I said, "I'm going to be gone for a little while."

What did you say?

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: I said, "Fine." [They laugh.]

[Cross talk.]

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: —forever.

So I got up on the rooftop of the other building, this opposite side. No one knows I'm up there. I have the toilet on a—

MS. FORESTA: A toilet, like a white—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: A commode, a full white heavy porcelain—

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Porcelain toilet.

MS. FORESTA: Toilet.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: —on a pull-string cord. And so, the bright lights were on. We had to set up bright lights. But no one knew I was up there and what was going on.

So Sandy and the group come out. There's s wonderful segment in it— moment in the film where there she is, beautifully dressed as always—

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: A cigarette in one hand and a drink in the other. [They laugh.]

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: She was— [inaudible]. And at the prescribed moment, a beautiful black limo comes down the street, takes a right turn into this drive—and it's a convertible.

MS. FORESTA: So a big Cadillac, in other words, kind of car.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Yeah, big—

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: It was a Bentley.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: A Bentley convertible.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Oh, a Bentley?

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Yeah, it was a beautiful—like an English motorcar.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Racing car green.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Yeah.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: And in the front is someone driving, but not—like this, with a mask.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: White mask.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: White mask.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Dressed in [black].

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Another figure to his right, to the driver's right. And she's in—describe her.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: She was dressed all in black also, with a white mask, and she had this gorgeous black hat with this big brim. Then in the back seat, behind the woman, was a younger male figure also dressed in dark clothes with a white mask but no hat.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: So the car pulls in, never stops, just slowly like this. And at the proper time—I don't know how we did it but we did it—the toilet comes out of the sky on this string.

And the young—the person in the back raises out of his backseat a little bit—remember it's a convertible, cuts the umbilical cord, the toilet drops in the back seat. Eggleston gives the car the gas and they speed away through the night.

Sandy's in the film, and there she is—[gasps]. [They laugh.]

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Well, everybody was mystified, you know. People were laughing and some people were angry. Some were—

MS. FORESTA: Some people were angry?

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Oh, yeah.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Oh, yeah, they were upset by it.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Yeah.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: "What was that? What was the meaning of that?"

MS. FORESTA: Wow.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Totally nonsensical.

When I went to Memphis State University, the art department was just, as I said earlier, snooze time. Nobody—

MS. FORESTA: So did you do others like this, or is this a one and only, Sandy?

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: That was the one and only one like that, but he used to burn a commode on the—outside of his apartment on the street. You know, there was like a little vehicle—I mean a little island, you know, sort of V-shaped, I'm told. I never saw this.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: That's right.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: But he would burn—on Saturday night, just as regular as rain, he would burn this commode out there.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Yes, I'd light a commode on fire. And you never have seen a commode flame, have you?

MS. FORESTA: No, I have not, but this is quite interesting.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: It's beautiful, and it glows. I mean, it was a serious fire inside that commode.

MS. FORESTA: So where did you get this Duchamp reference from? [Laughs.]

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Well, I—

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: From Duchamp.

MS. FORESTA: Yeah.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Oh, yeah.

MS. FORESTA: Yeah.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: I had become fascinated with Dadaism even before I left Alabama.

MS. FORESTA: Oh, you had?

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Yeah.

MS. FORESTA: And how did that come about?

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Because Melville Price—

MS. FORESTA: Oh, Melville Price.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: —who I mentioned earlier, had come from New York with a lot of not so much Dada thought, but he was quite different from any other faculty—

MS. FORESTA: Wow, this is interesting.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: I tell you, that's what happens. And I don't know—I'm not making—I'm not narrating this properly. Some of these art departments just get stifled, just absolutely dead in the woods.

There's no spirit, no enthusiasm, and it reflects in the work of the students. And I'm not saying they were, some of them, not good teachers. They were. But I became their—[inaudible]—for a short time, I guess. [Laughs.]

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: But tell Merry about—I think he became more interested in that when he was in New York, and it sort of kept up his interest. But tell Merry about writing away for the catalogue that Walter had done on the Duchamp exhibition.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Oh, yeah, I read that the first Duchamp exhibition, Marcel Duchamp exhibition, was at Pasadena Art Museum—Pasadena, California. And the director at that time was a man named Walter Hopps. And I wrote off, "Would you please send me a poster of"—I mean a—

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Catalogue.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: —"catalogue, and bill me?" And that's the only thing I needed to do. Not only did they send me the catalogue, which is a collectors' item now, they sent me a poster this big, Duchamp, green with Rose Sélavy. It's worth—not that it matters, but it's worth a good deal of money. But it's—those were interesting times.

MS. FORESTA: So this would have been in the—

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: 1963.

MS. FORESTA: 1963. Wow.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: And then when Bill met Walter in 1968—[laughs]—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Yeah.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: —he told him he'd sent away for this catalogue of the exhibition that Walter had done, and he said, "You know," he said, "I remember that."

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: His secretary—

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: His secretary came in and said, "Look, we have a request for the catalogue from Memphis, Tennessee." And he said, "Well, send that person the catalogue and throw in a poster." [They laugh.]

MS. FORESTA: That's fabulous.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Both of them are collectors' items.

MS. FORESTA: That's great. That's great.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Oh, I miss him so much. Did you know him at all?

MS. FORESTA: Walter?

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Of course.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Yeah, of course you would.

MS. FORESTA: Walter was the first person that I worked for when I went to American Art [Museum, Smithsonian].

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Did he drive you crazy?

MS. FORESTA: Well, there were frustrating moments, but you either—you either appreciated Walter or you turned around and walked away from Walter. But—

[Cross talk.]

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: We really became special friends. And late in his tenure [inaudible] he stayed here. He spent a lot of time—you know, he slept sometimes here at night because he—he was very unhappy.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: In the attic room.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Yeah.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: That's before he met Caroline [Huber] and went to Houston.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Caroline was his savior.

MS. FORESTA: So, I'm thinking that—

[Audio break.]

MS. FORESTA: All right, we're recording. Today is March 31st, and I am Merry Foresta, and I am at the home of William Christenberry, and we are continuing our interview for the Archives of American Art.

And Bill, since we spent so much time last session talking about your childhood and growing up and your art school and that background, I thought we might talk more specifically about photography and the role that it played in your career.

And a couple of very specific questions that we might answer and maybe get to a longer discussion, but when you were first working, you had said that an early inspiration was Walker Evans. And we certainly know about that effect in your work. And certainly your friendship with William Eggleston is known, and we talked about that last time. But were there any other photographers in your circle of friends that are worth talking about?

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: No, not really. And I think we—when we speak of Walker, Walker Evans, we should definitely include the influence, major influence, of James Agee. I never met him. You know, he died much too young. But it was Agee's prose, Agee's writing—

MS. FORESTA: That really led you to Walker?

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: —that led me to Walker.

MS. FORESTA: So you can't really—you're saying you can't really disconnect those two, for you.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: No.

MS. FORESTA: That's an interesting point.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: *Praise Famous Men* was, I don't want to say the most impressive or persuasive piece of literature I've ever read, but it was very, very important because what Agee was doing with the written word was what I wanted to do in paint, not through the camera.

MS. FORESTA: Now, that's interesting.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Yeah, it was painting— large painting.

MS. FORESTA: Could you expand on that a little bit?

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Yeah—

MS. FORESTA: I don't think I've ever heard you say it quite so straightforwardly.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: No, I'm a painter and a sculptor. You didn't really have to differentiate between painting

and sculpture, but I did a lot of both of those things.

And I was painting, as a student, totally nonobjective Abstract Expressionist paintings right out of New York, very much influenced by de Kooning, not by Pollock, although I gained a lot of—as time grew, I gained a lot of respect for his importance, Pollock's importance. But I began to question total nonobjectivity — for me. I think it's wonderful but not—that was not what I wanted to pursue.

So Santa Claus had brought my sister and me this little Brownie camera that has nothing but a shutter release. It was a Brownie Holiday, used 127 color film, which I have a source for today but that will take up all of your tape if I tell you my source. We'll go over it at dinner.

I began—I didn't know anything about photography, but with that camera all I had to do was to click the shutter. There was no focusing device, nothing.

MS. FORESTA: And the pictures came out— that you got processed were color pictures, right?

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: At the local drugstore.

MS. FORESTA: And a question I've always wanted to ask you is that the Brownie colors to me are very distinctive colors. They're not like any other color photography.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Right.

MS. FORESTA: And they even fade in an interesting way. So did any of those colors—I mean, this is a very formal question—did the colors themselves, did you try to translate those into paint at all? Did you ever try to mimic those?

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: No, I never tried to mimic those. I wanted to emphasize that the color snapshot, the Brownie color snapshot, was a fleeting reference for these big paintings. You know, the Brownie print itself was like square, a little square.

MS. FORESTA: What are they, about 2 ½ by 2 ½?

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Yeah, 2 ½. Yeah.

MS. FORESTA: My favorite part of them was the ones that came with the little deckle edges.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Yes, and that film at that time, Kodak film, had a red fox—

MS. FORESTA: Yes, that's—yeah.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: —on the side.

MS. FORESTA: That was pretty cool.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: But wasn't the—the Holiday image was 3 by 5, right? Wasn't it the Brownie Hawkeye that produced the square image?

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: The Hawkeye produced the square image.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Yeah.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Did I get that mixed up?

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Yeah. The Brownie Holiday was a little 3 by 5.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: The Holiday—

MS. FORESTA: Ah, okay.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: The one that he mostly—

MS. FORESTA: Yes.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: He mostly used the Holiday.

MS. FORESTA: The Holiday.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Yeah, because it was the landscape—I can't say I was frustrated by the square, because I made quite a few square format pictures, but you think of landscape this way.

MS. FORESTA: Yep.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: And, as I said, I processed it at the local drugstore in Tuscaloosa. And I didn't know or—well, I knew that I didn't want some garish distortion of the color, but actually the color wasn't bad.

MS. FORESTA: Oh, no, but it's just very distinct. To me it's always been—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Well, as Walker Evans once said, when he saw them, he said, "There's something about that little camera and that film that makes the color just right." [Laughs.] And that was about the time that he was—you know, he was not much for color or believed in it at that time, but then when he—he switched, but when he started using the SX-70 [Polaroid]—[whispers]—"Let me show you my toy"—and he liked that color.

MS. FORESTA: Yeah.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: But he—no, that's just the way it happened, with no pretense, nothing, and with no ideas, no idea that the world of photography would be interested in these things.

MS. FORESTA: So, besides Walker—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Yes?

MS. FORESTA: —can you remember who the first person was, or first organization that said, "Hey, let's show these," or, "This is an interesting group of pictures," that made them sort of separate from your other work? Do you know what I mean—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Yeah.

MS. FORESTA: —that sort of distinguished them as a, "Hey, these are great pictures."

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: When I was into this— I'm not sure this is going to answer your question but we can—

MS. FORESTA: No, we'll get there.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: —go in circles somehow— was when I went to Memphis—excuse me—from New York, still single, in '62 to take that job with then-Memphis State. Now it's the University of Memphis. Deadly dull department. Don't quote that. [They laugh.] The faculty was waiting on retirement. Nobody was interested in what was coming out of New York, you know, the work, et cetera, et cetera.

And I was just bored stiff with that. And I taught drawing and painting. They didn't have photography classes then. So I went into the landscape with this little camera and—really it was an infatuation or a love affair with the subject matter.

MS. FORESTA: And that's the Agee piece—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Yeah.

MS. FORESTA: —that you're talking about—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: That's right.

MS. FORESTA: —that connected you.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Yeah, it had to be something more than a form of effort.

MS. FORESTA: Did you have—is it only looking back, or did you actually have that conscious thought at the time of thinking, I'm going to try to do with images what Agee did with words?

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Well, I don't know if I can answer that precisely.

MS. FORESTA: That seems to me what, as we look back, that's what you might have been doing.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: I was very, very impressed with Agee's poetic sensibility, the way he put words together, refereeing to tenant houses standing there "silent and undefended in the sun." And that overwhelmed me, but what also was so important was that he was a fellow Southerner.

And I looked at Walker's pictures probably more formally. And that's not a criticism at the time. But Walker was recording in black and white as Agee was writing about, and doing it wonderfully. But Walker didn't get caught up in that at all. He was always—remained—and I think this is one of the great credits to his work, Walker Evans' work, was his objectivity, his objectivity with his camera, with his picture-making.

He cared about those tenant farmers that Agee writes about and some that he photographed, but you don't sense—or I don't, and I think it's been written that that wasn't Walker's aim, goal, whatever.

MS. FORESTA: So when you were—so you were out in the field taking these images but you were really back in the studio painting.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Yes, heavily.

MS. FORESTA: —and making—heavily making paintings.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Heavily in every way, scalewise, paint on the canvas with the thickness of paint on canvas, all of that gesture and *sturm und drang*, but with subject matter, the same subject matter—

MS. FORESTA: That was in a—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: —that was in a tenant shack, or a large painting—a huge painting of a graveyard in the countryside.

MS. FORESTA: They're such beautiful paintings. They're just fabulous paintings, those paintings.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Yeah, those things have held up, and I don't mean just physically. Paintwise—

MS. FORESTA: No, I know. They really—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: We were taught—or I was taught, fortunately—and this was the days when you primed your own canvas, or, if you could afford it, buy it—not stretched but buy it in rolls from New York. Vincente [ph] and Spurrow [ph]—I'll never forget the name of that company.

And we were taught—or I was taught to size it and prepare it with rabbit skin glue—excuse me—and white lead. You had to melt that white—the rabbit skin glue in a double boiler over water. And then the most dangerous component was the white lead.

MS. FORESTA: Yuck.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: I couldn't work with gloves. I've never known any painter—any artist that could work with gloves on. So I'm lucky to still be here. And maybe that's the reason—I think that's the reason that Sandy thinks there's some real problems right now in my head.

MS. FORESTA: [Laughs.] It's all the white lead.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: You know, that might be something we should look into.

MS. FORESTA: Look into. [They laugh.]

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: All right, now stop. It's serious here.

MS. FORESTA: But, so here are these photographs, and now you've taken these pictures, they're assembling, and at what point, though, did they take on, should we say—call it a life of their own, a—when did—I mean, they accumulated and at what—who walked in and said, "This is a book. This is a show. This is a"—or did you look at them and say that?

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: We had, at that time at the University of Alabama — this is—I can't remember exactly—remember what year Mel Price and his wife came down from upstate New York. Mel was sort of a late first generation, early second generation—

MS. FORESTA: Yeah, I think the—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: —Abstract Expressionist painter.

MS. FORESTA: —[Smithsonian] American Art Museum has one or two of his pieces.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Yes, and sadly—we don't want to get off on this—not because he came to Alabama but he isolated himself from what was really beginning to take off, and came there, and really and truly died there,

wilted on the vine.

But he was so important to me because he charged me with thinking. We had our own studios, advanced students or graduate students. He would come by often. And he wasn't an easy critic. I mean, he didn't—you know, he'd tell you like it was. He was kind of gruff and tough-looking, but handsome, wasn't he, Sandy?

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Very handsome but tough, from—where was he, from upstate New York somewhere. But he—and this is going to sound a little egotistical and I don't mean it this way—he latched on to me and maybe I to him, and out of that came a very, very close friendship, although it wasn't patting each other on the back.

I think I said it before, but one of the most important things I got from my study with Mel Price, he never made anything easy for me. And I have never been able to teach that way. I don't think there's anything wrong with that. It's probably necessary, but I was always a little bit more—but he would get—he would say, "God damn it! I told you that red didn't work. Try something else."

MS. FORESTA: So was he—he was interested in the photographs then.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Yeah.

MS. FORESTA: Yeah.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: He really was. But I don't mean to say he was harshly critical all the time. He was—when I was in that period—and not many of the faculty were—of preparing the white cotton duck—we'd order it from New York or somewhere and prepare it with white lead—rabbit skin glue and white lead. Lucky I'm still here.

MS. FORESTA: Yeah.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: There were some problems that people have had with it.

MS. FORESTA: I think the lead makes your teeth fall out, thought. [Laughs.]

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Well, my teeth have done pretty good. Excuse me. There are other parts—  
Hi, Sandy. How are you over there?

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: I'm fine. I may go shopping any minute now. [They laugh.]

MS. FORESTA: So, since we're sticking to the subject of photographs here, I think it seems like we need to flash forward a fair amount before somebody is looking at the photographs.

I personally remember, in 1977, going to an exhibit at Gerd Sander's gallery and that was—but I'm sure you had something—

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: I think it was earlier than that.

MS. FORESTA: I'm sure—I mean, that's just how early I remember it, but—

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Well, I remember that Francis Fralin and Jane [Livingston] had an exhibition of Bill's early Brownies at the Corcoran. I believe it was in '73.

MS. FORESTA: Wow.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: And of course Walter—

MS. FORESTA: There you go.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: —met Bill in—we arrived in '68 and it wasn't so long after that that we met—Bill met Walter.

MS. FORESTA: Walter.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Yeah. And of course that had to be between when we got there in '68—or in '72, so it may have been '69, '70. And of course you know Walter.

MS. FORESTA: Right.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: He took an interest in everything.

MS. FORESTA: He took an interest in everything, but I'm sure he took an interest in more than just the photographs.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Oh, yeah.

MS. FORESTA: I'm sure he was—it strikes me that Walter would have been one of that rare breed at the time, in the late '60s and early '70s, who could actually encompass a body of work that was all these different media and realize that they all went together.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: That was kind of unprecedented at the time. That's true. You were either a painter or a sculptor or—

MS. FORESTA: You had to be fit into a box.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: A square, a box. And he encouraged—not Walter but Price encouraged—well, large-scale paintings were—you were beginning to see a lot of those reproduced, large scale. I'm talking about graveyard—grave paintings 13 feet long, if I remember right, a lot of gesture.

And we'd order our paint from up in Philadelphia in large quantities. You couldn't afford two colors like that. And that paint, surprisingly, was very good. In other words, it's held up over the years. And we were taught, rightfully so, how to prepare it with rabbit skin glue and white lead.

It was a great—looking back on it—we were there how recently, Sandy?

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: In Alabama?

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: We went by that old studio—

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: November, yeah, 2009.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: These great old buildings there that are still standing, pre-Civil War that are just beautiful buildings in large spaces.

But that was a good time for that department, too. And I'd just, as I said, come, you know, from—well, that was when I went to Memphis, when I got to Memphis. Memphis State, it was snooze time.

MS. FORESTA: And I'm going to guess—I think it's a good guess—there weren't any photographers—there was no photography department. There's nothing—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: No.

MS. FORESTA: No one was teaching photography. They might have been teaching it in the business school for something, but—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: No. Well, maybe journalism.

MS. FORESTA: For journalism—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Yeah.

MS. FORESTA: —but that was it.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: But neither Eggleston— [clears throat]—excuse me—or I can—

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Would you like a glass of water?

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: I'm okay. I'll be all right.

Neither Eggleston or I can remember the exact moment we met, but we remember the first extended conversation we had. And it was his—at his and Rosa's house. And he was very, very interested in—well, he was immersed in Cartier-Bresson.

MS. FORESTA: Ah.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: "the decisive moment." "Look at this, Christenberry. Look at this." And that quick movement of camera, you know.

MS. FORESTA: And so how did you feel about that?

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: It didn't interest me nearly as much.

MS. FORESTA: Yeah.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: And this sounds a little self-serving. I started making—I had some of these little color snapshots, 3 by 5 or—3 by 5 inches, and others were 3 by 7, whatever. And he showed a real fascination with these and said that he was beginning to use color himself, and nobody used color like Eggleston. He's got his own color sensibility. But we were lone rangers in Memphis.

MS. FORESTA: So what year—so you were in Memphis until what year? That was just— and then you came—you were in Memphis until '67 and then came up here?

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: No, we married in '67. We moved up here in '68, September of '68.

MS. FORESTA: And that was to take a job at the Corcoran [College of Art and Design].

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Bill had a job at the Corcoran.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: I had a job come open, fortunately. It was still at about the last minute, but we were coming anyway, even if I—well, I used to say even if I had to drive a truck, which I can't do. [Laughs.] And it was not a very exciting department either at that time.

MS. FORESTA: I was going to say, can we pause a minute and can you talk a little bit about what the Corcoran was like in the—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: I'm just trying to remember.

MS. FORESTA: — in the late '60s? Who was there then? I know—

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Eugene Myers was the dean of the school.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Yeah.

MS. FORESTA: Eugene Myers.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: He was a tyrant.

MS. FORESTA: And was Walter there then?

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: No, not yet.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: No, no, Walter was not—

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Hermann Warner Williams was the director of the gallery. And Olga was there. Was that his—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Oh, Viso?

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: No.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Olga—

MS. FORESTA: Olga Hirshhorn.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Olga—oh.

[Cross talk.]

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: —[not] Hirshhorn. Anyway, she was his mistress.

MS. FORESTA: Ah.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: There was a big, you know, sort of—everybody knew about it but—but Dean Myers was the head of the school. And, believe it or not, they had opened a branch of the Corcoran School in Columbia, Maryland, which was this brand-spanking-new made—created town.

MS. FORESTA: Yeah.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: And there may have been 14 people in that town that wanted to take art lessons. [They laugh.] But they had—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: I think that's an exaggeration, 14. [Laughs.]

MS. FORESTA: I'd say—

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Well, he would know because he had to schlep out there every Tuesday and Thursday night to teach—

MS. FORESTA: Oh, my goodness.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: —at this branch of the Corcoran.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: What was it, like 35 miles one way?

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Oh, it was—yeah. He wouldn't get back until 10:30 or 11:00 at night.

MS. FORESTA: Wow.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: And so he did that for a year.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: And nobody was interested in what I was interested in. I'm talking about students—

MS. FORESTA: And you were taught to teach drawing or painting.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Drawing and painting—

MS. FORESTA: The fine arts.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: —and I did a lot of teaching of sculpture, but drawing and painting were the primary ones because in those days, painting was the more dominant thing in American art, especially in art departments.

You're reminding me of some painful times. How did I do that? What did we—what kind of car did we have then?

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Oh, I don't—we had—we still had that station wagon.

MS. FORESTA: I have never heard about that campus in Columbia.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: I think we had that huge station wagon still then, before, you know, we sold it.

MS. FORESTA: Was Gene Davis in the faculty at the time? No? He hadn't shown up yet either?

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: No, he hadn't started yet. Brockie Stevenson of course was there. Jack Perlmutter. Who were the—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Keep going.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Well—

MS. FORESTA: Was—Jane Livingston was—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: No, Jane came later.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: I think she must have just come there.

MS. FORESTA: Well, you predated all these people. This is—

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: But she was there— either if not there when we got there, then shortly—

MS. FORESTA: Closely.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: You know, we all—oh, Bob Stackhouse was there. I think Bill Dutterer was there. You know—

MS. FORESTA: Did you have any interaction with any of the faculty at American University, with Jacob Kainen—

[Cross talk.]

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Well, of course, see, that was the—I don't want to say the dominant place, but that was a place that had something of a reputation, mainly—primarily because [Kenneth] Noland had taught there.

MS. FORESTA: Yeah.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: But the Corcoran was affiliated with GW [George Washington University], if I—oh, Frank Wright was there. Bill Woodward was there.

MS. FORESTA: Wow.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: And was it Jerry Lake who taught—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Photography.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: I think he taught photography.

MS. FORESTA: That's right.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: He was associated with GW. And of course Joe Cameron and John—I think—did John Gossage teach there too? I can't remember.

MS. FORESTA: John did teach there. I don't know if he was there then but—

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Yeah.

MS. FORESTA: Yeah.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: But we lived down Mintwood Place then, and I remember, you know, Bob Stackhouse lived on that street, John Gossage, Joe Cameron, Andrew Hudson, who was the art history teacher.

MS. FORESTA: Right.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Walter actually lived there for a long time too. Tony Blazys, who was one of the working guys. He was a hoot.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: He was chief preparator at the Corcoran.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Yeah, Lithuanian. Funny guy.

MS. FORESTA: You guys could have had a bus show up every morning and have gone—[they laugh].

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Right. Yeah.

MS. FORESTA: Oh, how interesting.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: That brings back many memories, some fond.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Yeah.

MS. FORESTA: And where were the—did you have a studio at the Corcoran then or did they just have classrooms? It's a pretty small place, so I would—so it's still downstairs in the basement?

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Well, let's see—no, no, no.

MS. FORESTA: Or had they—did they have the Georgetown campus then?

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: No.

MS. FORESTA: No.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: It was all at the Corcoran.

MS. FORESTA: It was all at the Corcoran.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: All at the main Corcoran.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: But they had studios— they had studios. They used the Hemicycle, because Bill taught up there a lot.

MS. FORESTA: Oh yeah.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: That was all studio space.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: But that wasn't a studio.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Pardon?

MS. FORESTA: That was a teaching studio.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: For the students, yeah. Your students.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Yeah, for a large—large classes.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Bill found—well, he was lucky to find, not too soon after we moved to Washington, this place at 2625 Connecticut Avenue—up on the third floor?

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Third—second—third floor, right down here.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Yeah.

MS. FORESTA: Yeah.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: And he stayed there until 1982.

MS. FORESTA: It was a beauty salon on the ground floor, a wonderful man—man and woman—Mr. and Mrs. Kling.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Henri Kling.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: They were from—they were not American-born.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: They were French.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: French, right. And I don't think they needed to rent the space, or cared to, or maybe they'd had a bad experience with somebody, but it was a straight-through space but—

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: It was an old ballet studio—

[Cross talk.]

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: A dance studio, but it was only windows at the street, Connecticut Avenue side, and two windows in the back. But it had a toilet. It didn't have a shower or anything like that. And I could easily walk there or take my bicycle. And they were so kind to me. I loved them. I was saying—

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: They were really wonderful people, yeah.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: I took a walk this morning to clear my muddled-up head, and walked down there and it brought about many memories.

MS. FORESTA: So you had a studio there, and it was—well, before we get to that part of the story, I wanted—before we leave the photography and its influence on your—or its role in some of the large paintings you were doing, you were also making constructions.

And how did photography fit into that process in terms of thinking out anything? Were they as inspirational for the shape and look of the sculptures as they were for the paintings? Did you use those for content as well?

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: The sculptures eventually turned out to be quite representational. I refuse to say models. I've never considered these things models—

MS. FORESTA: Right.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: —because I don't have any scale or floor plan to go by. It's all done by eye. I didn't always have photographs to reference them, photographs of the actual buildings. I had to—like, in the back I'd have to invent what the back door might look like.

MS. FORESTA: Oh, fabulous, yeah.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: And one called the *BBQ Inn*, still one of my favorite ones, I had to hand-carve each brick. That's the reason I'm a little crazy.

MS. FORESTA: Just do it over and over again.

So, the photographs, then, you sort of worked from them a little bit but then you'd have to invent stuff. So there was this kind of relationship between the sculpture and the photographs that one kind of played into the other.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: That's right. The *Green Warehouse* probably is a pretty darn good replica—if we want to call it that—of the real building, although I didn't take measurements because it was such a simple structure. But some of the others were fairly not ornate but complicated, and I had to invent.

But I wanted the feel of it, the feel of that. And that was another reason I decided pretty quickly that I wanted to place them on a field of real Alabama red earth. And of course when they were first seen by some people they said, "That's a model."

MS. FORESTA: Yeah.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: No model. A model has everything exact, scale and everything. So if you matched one of those sculptures up with—if one of those buildings still existed, certain idiosyncratic things occur that you'll see right off it's not a model.

MS. FORESTA: So is it fair to say that by the time you arrived in Washington and had the studio on Connecticut Avenue, you were beginning to work in these constellations of images that could contain a photograph, a painting, a drawing, a sculpture, and one might come in front of the other but they all kind of bounced off of each other and they kind of—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: And that's the way I always saw them then and now.

MS. FORESTA: Now.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Well, you didn't start making the building constructions until '74.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Yeah, but I've always seen them in the context of what we're talking about.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Yes, since you started making them, right.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Yeah.

MS. FORESTA: And so in '74. So coming here was a little bit in advance of those buildings. And would it be fair to say that leaving the South was an impetus in making these buildings, which are—which were so close to being—close to being memory but had so many elements that seemed like they were almost real, the way you almost have a dream and it feels so real and yet it's distorted as well?

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Yeah, because there's several called Dream Buildings that came to me in a dream.

MS. FORESTA: But that was a later series, right?

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: That's right.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: A later series.

MS. FORESTA: But they really started as kind of a way to hold on to—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: That which I couldn't hold on to.

MS. FORESTA: Hold on to.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: And then I knew—and the landscape was rapidly disappearing, that aspect of vernacular architecture. If nothing else, some of those pieces would be a decent record of what the vernacular looked like in those days.

MS. FORESTA: So, before you started making the buildings, did you ever feel that photographs were not satisfying enough? Did they—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: No, no, no, no.

MS. FORESTA: Did you ever feel frustrated by them?

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: I never felt one way or the other. I never felt that there was an inferior means of expression or a superior. It was coequal. And I hope that comes through in the work, even in the early Brownies, that love affair with that subject matter. And that was the simplest—well, I don't know if that's the right word, "simplest," but it was the best way to corral that, to contain that—

MS. FORESTA: Yeah.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: —to bring that about was with that camera. I could stand out there and sketch, but it wouldn't be the same.

And, also, I wanted some semblance of—"accuracy" is not the right word but what the real thing actually looked like. But I didn't get out there with a measuring tape and measure proportions of that building at all, or any building.

And I have such fond memories—excuse me. I felt then, way back, that this was something that I had stumbled upon, this way of working, this way of seeing, this way of feeling that had some promise for the future. And it still goes on.

MS. FORESTA: As you're talking, I get a real sense of an artist suddenly finding—and it must happen to other artists— finding a method, a way, a feeling about the way you're working that you think, this is going to carry me for a long time.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: It's not something specific; it's something—

MS. FORESTA: This is a rich vein. I can go deep in this yet.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: I want to mine this vein as long as it will take me.

MS. FORESTA: Will take me. And it has no—it has no limit at that point.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Right. And even today I have—let's see. I'm working on a piece right now—not far enough along; I'll show it to you, but you can tell that it's—it's something I've had in mind for a long, long time and didn't do—hadn't done. Now I'm getting a little bit excited about it.

MS. FORESTA: Great.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: I'm going to see where it takes me.

MS. FORESTA: Great.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: I've had people ask me, "Would you be willing to make a second *BBQ Inn* or second *Green Warehouse*?" I think there are two *Green Warehouses* but they're different. But, no, that doesn't interest me. A million dollars—

MS. FORESTA: Right. I can see exactly why it wouldn't.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: A million dollars might sway me, but—[laughs]—no. It's no fun. It's no excitement.

MS. FORESTA: Yeah.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: There's no reason for being to do that, right?

MS. FORESTA: And at what—in what point in this did you find what I'll call—you sort of built on this vein when you started taking these trips every year back down to rephotograph and rephotograph and rephotograph.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: I did not consciously realize that what I was doing was—you can't capture the passing of time, but maybe the camera recording it like I was doing it—well, as you know, there's some sequences of a building from when it was in pretty good shape over time when it's shown and then it's gone, or the rubble is there.

I think of one beautiful—this wasn't a piece of junk. This was once a fine house that I—I didn't grow up with but it was near my grandparents' house, a real Southern—not a Southern mansion but a real Southern house with a tin roof, big house. And I photographed that over 20-something years and watched it deteriorate, and then only—the last picture is just a pile of rubble. It just made sense.

MS. FORESTA: And—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: But I can't—see, I can't—lets not get too esoteric here or too sentimental, but I can't—I

wish I could sometimes. I've tried within myself—I wish I could do it writing—to express the feeling—feelings of all of this, especially discovering a subject. Making a picture of it would be one thing, or carrying it on through to realizing it as an object. It is something very, very special.

MS. FORESTA: It is. And, well, I think—I'm probably probing really deeply in terms of the process, deeper than anybody could possibly explain. It's just so fascinating to me because the work is so apparently joined and it's so unique. I don't know any other artist that has quite been able to manage that reverberation between media. And it's—I think it really will stand as a very important model for a long time.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: I hope so. The show that you all did—Betsy [Broun]— the Smithsonian American Art [Museum]. Of course we could go further than that now 'cause time has passed, but that was a pretty good example.

MS. FORESTA: Well, let's—so let's leave the esoteric of this process and just some specific kinds of things that I think will be interesting for this interview at the Archives of American Art.

Talk a little bit about your galleries that you've been associated with, some particulars of galleries and exhibits that have been, you think, important to your career. I know you—as we've said, you've been—you were associated with Gerd Sander's gallery here in Washington. Was that the first gallery? No.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: It was Henri, wasn't it?

MS. FORESTA: You were with—

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Here, yeah, the first one was Henri's gallery. Then he also— Nesta Dorrance exhibited his—with Jefferson Place Gallery.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: I did not—

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: The first commercial gallery that represented him was in Memphis. It was a Mary Chilton's gallery.

MS. FORESTA: Ah.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: And that was Alex Chilton's mother.

MS. FORESTA: Yes.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Alex Chilton recently passed away.

MS. FORESTA: Yes.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Box Tops.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: And then, so, Mary Chilton's was the first—

MS. FORESTA: Wow.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: —at least since I've know you. Then here it was Henri, Jefferson Place Gallery. Then it was—I think it was Gerd. And then of course Middendorf Lane, you know, which became Middendorf Gallery. Then—

MS. FORESTA: Did you—

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Let's see, then it was Hemphill Fine Arts.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: And then—

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: And that's—

[Cross talk.]

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Well, then Virginia Zabriskie in New York—

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Yeah.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: —contacted us, or me, and I was with her gallery for several years.

MS. FORESTA: Oh, you were with Virginia.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Your first exhibition was in '76 with Virginia, December of '76.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: That's right, '76.

MS. FORESTA: So that was the first New York gallery that picked you up.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmation.]

MS. FORESTA: Virginia's is an amazing—has an amazing eye and mind.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: I liked her.

MS. FORESTA: She was an amazing—

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Yeah.

MS. FORESTA: —is an amazing gallerist.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Yeah.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Is she still living? I don't know.

MS. FORESTA: Yes, she is. Yes, she is, and the gallery still goes. She closed the Paris gallery but—

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: I think that's Charlie [our rabbit]. He's looking for his afternoon treats.

MS. FORESTA: Anyway, and then Pace/MacGill.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Yeah, and Bill has been with Pace/MacGill I believe since 1985. I think that was—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: It's been a long time, and it's been—

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: I mean, that's when he had his first exhibition. He may have joined a gallery before that. I don't think there was anything in between.

MS. FORESTA: And, in your mind, the most— the first important museum show was when? Or gallery show, I suppose. Before you got to D.C.? In Memphis or—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: No.

MS. FORESTA: Was it at the Corcoran, that first big show, that actually combined so many—you know, really made the statement, this is—all these media are important and they must be shown together.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Well, actually no, that would have been the Rice [University] exhibition that Walter [Hopps] put together in 1982.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: In Houston.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: In Houston.

[Cross talk.]

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: And then it came to the Corcoran in '83.

MS. FORESTA: Ah. I didn't realize—so it originated in—

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: It originated with Walter in Houston.

MS. FORESTA: At Rice.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: The Institute for the Arts at Rice was—and I don't know but probably still is—a very active exhibition space at that time.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Well, it's the Menil now.

MS. FORESTA: It's the Menil. It was the—

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Yeah.

MS. FORESTA: Yeah, I was going to say—

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: It was the precursor of the Menil. And Walter had moved to Houston and was working with Madame [Dominique] de Menil.

MS. FORESTA: That's right.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: And so, that was Bill's very—that was the very first time the Klan work was ever exhibited.

MS. FORESTA: Ah.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: And then it came to the Corcoran.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Would you believe—

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: If I recall correctly, I think Jane [Livingston] maybe expanded it a little bit so it wasn't quite the same exhibition that it had been at the Menil.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Would you believe—I had forgotten about this—that there was an exhibition of mine, of Klan work, not the full tableau—and I don't remember why I fragmented it—at the Phillips?

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Well, of course. That was in 1996.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: And that was—what was his name?

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Charlie Moffett.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Charlie Moffett. I remember when we were working on an installation one day he said, "Mm-mm, I sure don't want my museum bombed." [They laugh.] Those were his exact words.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: And he called you up about that. He said there had been—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Threats.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: —a staff person and a security guard who had complained about it. Well, and you went and talked to the staff and it was okay after—

[Cross talk.]

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: I asked if we could have a—get the staff that was concerned, or any and all people on the staff to comment.

MS. FORESTA: So let's, since we've now gotten onto the Klan, let's talk about the *Klan Room* for a little bit. And you've talked about it in lots of places, and I am interested in it from the point of view—it really began in—when, in the—when you came up here to D.C.? No, it started earlier than that.

And it's my recollection that one of the first ideas that kind of—that triggered some thinking involved a photograph, because you went to a Klan meeting and actually took, very surreptitiously, a photograph.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: That's right. You've got a good memory. I couldn't look through the viewfinder. And I asked, in my Southern voice, a Klansman there—they had on their hoods but they had it open—you know how they can drape down—

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: The faces were open.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: The faces were open.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Exposed.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: And I went up to one of them and I said, "Sir, is it all right to make a few pictures here?" "No photographs allowed." So I turned and walked away. But in a little while I went back. And it was a cool night and I had an open jacket, and I couldn't see through the viewfinder.

We were looking at those pictures yesterday, some of them. And they're formally or aesthetically not terrific pictures but really strong in terms of—one of them looked at me like that. I don't know how he missed that

camera.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: But you had started work on the *Klan Tableau* before that because you had done—Peggy Pulliam, and was it her mother, or Rosa—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Rosa Eggleston.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: —they had made costumes for these Klan dolls before I even met Bill.

MS. FORESTA: Oh, you're kidding. Oh, I didn't know.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: I remember you said—

MS. FORESTA: So that's really early.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: —and you had gone when you were in Tuscaloosa—remember, you said you and your friend Ed, was it, were going to visit the courthouse where there was supposed to be a Klan meeting, which was advertised in the newspaper and held in the courthouse.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Oh, yeah, they were open meetings.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: That never fails to astound me, you know?

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: But—yeah, true.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: And you went—you went and Ed didn't because he said he was Jewish and he just was not going to go up there.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: [Laughs.] He was smart.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: But Bill did, and that's where that drawing *Nighthawk* came from, you know, where the Klansman is standing there and that evil eye is looking sideways out of the—so that was before he left Tuscaloosa.

MS. FORESTA: And this photograph was.

And so you made these dolls. And, I mean, we can touch briefly on the process of making these dolls out of GI Joe dolls.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: GI Joe had just come out and just been discovered. And I'll never forget going to a store and buying—it was probably six or eight GI Joe dolls. And the young lady at the cash register—I'll never forget it, said, "Mister, it's none of my business, but it's nowhere near Christmastime. What are you going to do with all those GI dolls?" And I said, "Young lady, if I told you, you wouldn't believe me."

MS. FORESTA: I was going to say—[they laugh].

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: She didn't say anymore.

But—[inaudible]—really—because those things are not easily made. I can't sew—but those set-in sleeves—you ladies know more about set-in sleeves.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: The Klan uniforms.

MS. FORESTA: Yeah.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Yeah, and getting those satin—

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: And those little hats, those little pointy hats.

MS. FORESTA: Pointy hats. And they were—they started out being— what's the word I want to use—slightly more standard, less complicated, simpler. But as it evolved, they always seemed to me to get more and more decorative and exotic and—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Well, I'm, again, dealing with the hierarchy because the hierarchy—like the Imperial Wizards costume is quite different, I mean in fanciness and sequins and whatever. But the basic ones are white with no ornamentation except that cross here on the chest.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: And the red—you know, they have the red—some of them had the red—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Yeah.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: —ribbing around them, you know.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Let me go get—you all keep it going, and you'll probably do better than—

MS. FORESTA: Great. I can just turn it off here until you get back.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: —while I go get a book or two of—

[Audio break.]

MS. FORESTA: I'm turning back the recorder on—I'm turning on the recorder again while we look at a book, a special edition book called *KKKK*. And it's a beautiful book, a very sumptuous book, but the first photograph makes me think that, increasingly, as you've made these Klan dolls, they seem to be creatures that were made to be photographed.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: You're probably right.

MS. FORESTA: I mean, as you made them you began to think of the photograph that would result.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: I'm setting it up— setting up with different lights and backdrops and whatever.

MS. FORESTA: Because you could control different emotions, or add emotion to—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Or, since it's GI Joe, see, underneath you could give him certain positions.

MS. FORESTA: Yeah.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: It's not a rigid doll. And the costumes, or uniforms, are based on their hierarchy. The higher— the goal when there's—high up in the Klan.

MS. FORESTA: You know, I don't think I ever really focused—as I am at this moment—focusing on their little hands, that make them seem very human.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: That's a giveaway too.

MS. FORESTA: Being able to keep the hand in there—yes, it reminds you it's a doll, but they look human.

So how many dolls do you think you've made so far? Klan dolls.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Golly.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Well—

MS. FORESTA: I mean, have you kept track of them?

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: In the tableau there are a lot of the individual GI Joe dolls dressed as Klansmen. I think that's one of the more effective ones in—

MS. FORESTA: This is amazing.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: You see that hand?

MS. FORESTA: Yeah.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: That's the giveaway. I remember setting that up and I wanted that to be that it's not a real person but it could be.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Gosh, I'm trying to think.

MS. FORESTA: Now, some of these were made in the *Klan Room* that you built, right, because I remember some of these structures.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Right down there on Connecticut Avenue. Well, there was an anteroom to my main studio, 2625 Connecticut. I walked by there the other day.

MS. FORESTA: And am I also correct in thinking that you were photographing them before the theft happened, so that the only record, then, that you had of them were these photos?

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: No, I don't believe so, Merry.

MS. FORESTA: Okay.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: What year was that—

MS. FORESTA: Well, not these photos maybe—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Not these photos.

MS. FORESTA: —but there were—but you started photographing the dolls before they were stolen.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: And individual—

MS. FORESTA: Or did you start photographing them after they were stolen?

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: No, it was before, some of them.

MS. FORESTA: Some of them. Not these particular photographs in this book, which strike me as being much more elaborate than the other photos.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Oh, yeah, I spent a lot of time obviously setting up here. See, some idea of scale there, that black pointed-headed building is about this big.

MS. FORESTA: Yeah.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: You can decide whether he's dead or dying or resting or sleeping or what.

MS. FORESTA: Do you ever show the photographs on their own or do you always show them with the dolls? Is that an odd question?

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: No, I'm thinking.

MS. FORESTA: It may be. I'm just wondering if they—they seem to have a deep relationship, and so that's why I'm—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Ask the question again and maybe I can get it.

MS. FORESTA: So, do you ever just show the photographs and not have the doll sculptures—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: The book has been—

MS. FORESTA: The book's been, obviously, by itself.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: The exhibition set of the book, you know, not mounted, it can be—has been done that way. But, see, I have to be very careful, as you know, how these things are seen and in what context, because they can be misconstrued. And that one, see, the Confederate flag is used as a backdrop. We saw another one before where our American flag—

MS. FORESTA: Flag.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: —was used.

MS. FORESTA: This one.

So, overall, do you think that these have gotten the reception that—do you think people understand these?

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: The work or the dolls?

MS. FORESTA: The work—the dolls, the work?

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: No, I don't think so. I don't think overall—there were some supporters and some, "Why would anybody want to do that?" Or actually some have said, "He's pro-Klan"—not to my face.

MS. FORESTA: Well, I remember—god, was it—it must be 15 years ago, Bill—I don't know if you remember, but I came over and it was for the Friends of Photography [San Francisco, CA] See magazine. And I did an interview—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: See magazine.

MS. FORESTA: —with you and with David Levinthal. And David Levinthal had done—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: What had he done?

MS. FORESTA: He had done some controversial tabletop images with, I think, African-American—

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Was it the black memorabilia?

MS. FORESTA: Yeah.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Yeah.

MS. FORESTA: And he was getting flak for that: How could a white Jewish guy from New York have access to that and use it? Who gave him the right to use it? And it's sending the wrong message. And you were talking about the Klan material.

And I think we had an interesting conversation about not only the black memorabilia but the Jewish concentration camp stuff that he had done, and just how you can play this idea, because in both cases, both of you are meticulous constructors of your scenes that you photographed, and you made them very beautiful.

And these are very beautiful. The images show gorgeous satin materials. And, let's face it, the Klan—it's frightening but they're beautiful shapes, these long triangles of the hats and—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Well, I think whoever discovered that pyramidal hat, cap, whatever, was something special. I mean, I don't like him, her, but it was so powerful.

MS. FORESTA: And the way you've constructed these pictures and lit them with, in a way, very artificial kinds of lighting— blues and pinks and—so they're very beautiful. And here you've constructed this book which itself is very beautiful. It's got a satin cover that you just want to run your hand over.

So you're really pushing that—the seductive side of this. And I would imagine it's fairly easy for people to misunderstand this material.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Well, it hasn't been seen in years but when it was first seen—where was it, Sandy?

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: The Klan work? It hasn't been seen in years? It just finished up a seven-tour—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: No, but years ago. Where was it first shown?

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: It was first shown at the Rice [University] Museum—

MS. FORESTA: Museum.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Yes, in Houston.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: —in 1982.

MS. FORESTA: And it had a special—it was its room.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: It's all in a special room, right, and the same when it came to the Corcoran in 1983.

MS. FORESTA: Eighty-three.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Corcoran had a bigger space.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Bigger space, yeah.

MS. FORESTA: And I remember, that was—

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: That was a very—that was a very strange thing, a very effective thing, I thought, the way Jane [Livingston] had done that installation.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Yeah, satin.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Well, it was either—I don't know if it was wood or it was—but it was draped, you know—

MS. FORESTA: It was draped.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: —from the ceiling almost—

MS. FORESTA: Yes.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: —or roof.

MS. FORESTA: Yes. It was almost like a big satin tent kind of thing.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Yeah, exactly. Right. Yeah. And then it wasn't shown for a long time until 1996 when Trudy Wilner Stack did the exhibition at the Center for Creative Photography, along with University of Arizona.

MS. FORESTA: Well, I remember when—this is going to be terrible because at this moment I can't remember who donated it, but there was somebody who donated one Klan doll.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: That was Elliot Thompson.

MS. FORESTA: Thank you.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: You're welcome.

MS. FORESTA: Elliot Thompson—

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Yeah.

MS. FORESTA: —donated one Klan doll to the—

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Yeah, it's in the Luce Center [Luce Foundation Center for American Art, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.] now.

MS. FORESTA: —to the National Collection of Fine Arts, [Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.]. And it was just after I'd started working there. And I think it was before your theft.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Yes, it was.

MS. FORESTA: So it was a doll before the theft.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Yeah, I had forgotten about that.

MS. FORESTA: And I remember, at the time we used to have accession meetings twice a year before the commissioners would come, to review the proposed pieces. And here on this table sat this Klan doll. And it's dressed in black satin, I believe, with some red lining.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: It is, yeah.

MS. FORESTA: And none of us knew quite what to say about it. And there was a great debate about whether or not we should propose this or not. And Joshua Taylor stood up and said, "This is an important piece. We may not show it all the time, but this is an important piece for us to have."

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Good for him.

MS. FORESTA: And it was accessioned. And I think it's been shown, indeed, rarely. It is hard to know quite what to show it with.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: But it's out in the Luce Center now.

MS. FORESTA: But now it's out in the Luce Center.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Yeah. In fact, we saw it there.

You know, I think maybe between when the Corcoran showed the *Klan Tableau* and the Center for Creative Photography showed it—remember when there was an exhibition of that work at the U in KC, [University of Missouri-Kansas City, MO] and Craig—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Subler?

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Subler—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Subler.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Yeah. What was it?

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Subler—

MS. FORESTA: Subler.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: —exhibited it there, at the gallery there. And I'm trying to remember what year that was. I forgot.

MS. FORESTA: Yeah.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: But then, you know, that CCP [Center for Creative Photography] show went to—well, opened in Tucson, went to New Orleans—

MS. FORESTA: Orleans.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: —in February. It was Mardi Gras. Nobody paid the least bit of attention—

MS. FORESTA: Bit of attention.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: —to it because there were all these other people walking around in costumes—

MS. FORESTA: And satin robes, so—

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Yeah.

MS. FORESTA: Yeah.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: And then it went to Philadelphia Academy of Fine Arts.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: I don't—

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Is that the right—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: It's close to it. It's not the museum but—Institute for the Arts? Is that right? [Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia, PA ]

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: No, it was that beautiful building—I'm sorry, I can't remember. It wasn't the Philadelphia Museum.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: We should have a record of it.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Yeah. I can look it up for you. And it finished up at SECCA [Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art] in Winston-Salem.

MS. FORESTA: And how did it do in the South, in Winston-Salem?

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Well, you know, when it was exhibited at all of these places, because Bill did not want anyone to see it until it was fully installed, the galleries were usually off limits or locked, or whatever. And invariably rumor would get out that they're installing this Klan work.

Well, of course there would be all kinds of uproar because people didn't know what it was like, or anything about it. And I remember at CCP when Trudy Wilner Stack and Bill and Terry Pitts, I think had to—

MS. FORESTA: Yeah.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: —had to—they met with all kinds of organizations on the right and the left. I think they even had a meeting with the Pan-Hellenic Societies because some of the black fraternities had gotten very upset.

And once people saw it and Bill talked to them about it, it was like a 180-degree curve because, "Oh, now I get it. Now I see what it is." So, normally after people—once people see it, then they understand it.

MS. FORESTA: And do you think that—it's my sense that you increasingly began photographing these dolls and increasingly photographed them in more sort of almost artificial lights, and creating these scenes for them and situations.

Was that a sense of removing them from reality towards some kind of horrific almost nightmare world? Did that emphasize that, do you think, or did you simply see that as just a larger creative avenue to—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: More the latter—

MS. FORESTA: Yeah.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: —because I honestly don't think the work has ever been seen better—better seen than when it was installed in that little room down on Connecticut Avenue, where that—

MS. FORESTA: Interesting. So talk about that little room for a bit. You're talking about the room in your studio—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Yeah—

MS. FORESTA: —where you first built them.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: —where that theft occurred. Of course, let me say, at that time there were not as many objects as there are now, not that I've added anything in recent years. But there was an anteroom to my 2625. Walk up the steps, third level, little room over here with a door, and then my work area, which ran the—it was like an old dance studio.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: But each of them off of a little landing.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Right.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: And then there was a stairway up to the third floor. And Gerd [Sander] had a place upon the third floor for the longest time.

MS. FORESTA: Ah.

So, if you've got the energy, the whole event of this studio theft—if you had— you've been making these dolls and you've got this room, which—did you spend—and you must have spent time arranging the dolls in the room and creating the same kind of structures and things, combinations.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: I had the pedestals and certain hanging devices for the walls.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Yeah, he had the circular jail there.

MS. FORESTA: You did have the circular jail there.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Yes. It was very definitely an environment—an environment in which you had to kind of wend your way through—

MS. FORESTA: Yeah.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: —because it was not just suddenly. And you had to go up close and move back.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: And there was a sheet of red Plexiglas over the window, so there was this whole red—blood red glow to the room when the light was shining during the daytime.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: But nobody from the street could see anything but that red—

MS. FORESTA: Well, lord only knows what they thought was going on up there.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Well—[they laugh]—the red light district. I never told anybody that.

MS. FORESTA: So, one day someone must have broken in and it disappeared.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: I went to work down there. I walked down there—was it today or yesterday—I haven't done that in years—from here.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Yeah, but where he was talking about when the theft occurred—

MS. FORESTA: Yeah.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: It was over the Christmas/New Year's holiday period.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: And that's when—

MS. FORESTA: You weren't there.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: He hadn't been in the studio. He wouldn't go in there all the time.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: No, no, it was—

[Cross talk.]

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: —he would open the door and go in there.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: It was a storeroom but not—it was sort of an exhibited storeroom, not a—

[Cross talk.]

MS. FORESTA: So it was all closed off. It wasn't actually part of the—

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Oh, it was closed and locked.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Oh, no, no, it was totally separate.

MS. FORESTA: It was closed and locked. Ah.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: But the lock on that door was nothing more than just a simple padlock. And the pin hinges were on the exterior. So the thief, or thieves, didn't have to do much to get that off.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: They just popped the hinges off it.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: They just popped the hinges. And they would take an object— like if this were a doll in a vitrine and take it and lift it, take the doll and leave the vitrine.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: And that's what they did. They left the vitrines and took the dolls.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Concentrated on the dolls. What were they saying, 20 something?

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: I don't remember how many there were. We'd never done an inventory of any of that stuff. And there was one doll that was encased in a vitrine that was on the wall that had a light in it and a blue pane of glass in it. But they couldn't figure out how to get that open or off the wall, so that wasn't taken.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: And that's where they found considerable fingerprints.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Yeah, but they were never—the police were never able to find any—

MS. FORESTA: That must have been an interesting focal. [Laughs.]

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Trying to explain it to the police—

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Well, I remember you had called Gerd [Sander], right, because you said—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Well, Gerd was upstairs.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Bill said he couldn't believe his eyes.

MS. FORESTA: So you come back, you open the door, and it's empty. The door's open and it's gone.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: The door is slightly ajar.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: I thought—I thought they closed it all back up.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: They closed it but they couldn't—they didn't screw—it was loose.

MS. FORESTA: You could see that it was—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Yeah.

MS. FORESTA: Yeah.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: But right across the street—it's interesting that we're talking about this today because we haven't done this in a long time—I walked down there, not for this reason, and walked back up the other side and happened to look up, and that room, that space, you couldn't see anything.

But it really—you know, your first thought it it's the Klan, it was the Klan. I don't think so. I think it's somebody

that wanted to possess it, the negative sense of that.

MS. FORESTA: How much did you—

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Well, the thing that's so creepy about it is that it was—the theft itself was strange because the door from the outside downstairs had been jimmed, and then they went upstairs. They didn't bother with the main part of the studio at all. And they just—you know, this is the work that they wanted.

And, also, Bill—we sort of felt that it had to be somebody who knew Bill's habits because they knew he would not be there especially on that weekend and especially like on New Year's Day because Alabama was playing in a bowl game. And of all the games—

MS. FORESTA: Games—

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: —he would never be anywhere but right in front of the television set.

MS. FORESTA: So there it is, it's gone, and you started building it again.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: I had a student—in those days Corcoran—I probably shouldn't preface it with this but the Corcoran accepted some students that were—how shall I say, Sandy— outpatients from St. Elizabeth?

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Yeah.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: That's fair game.

MS. FORESTA: Who were outpatients from St. Elizabeth.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Yeah, they were sent to the Corcoran I guess as art therapy.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: And I know a lot about art therapy. Zero. [They laugh.]

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: But the fact is that the teachers weren't informed of this.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: No, we didn't know. But there was one young man—one young student who came up to me after seeing the tableau that was sitting in the room, he said—it was scary. And I can't mimic his expression or the way he said it, but "I must come back and see that work. I must come back and see that work." Well, that tuned me in not to invite him back.

MS. FORESTA: Oh, that's—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: But I can't prove anything on him. But I don't believe it's destroyed. I think somebody has it—

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Squirreled away somewhere.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: And I don't think it was the Klan.

MS. FORESTA: Yeah. And it's not—

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: We hired a private detective.

MS. FORESTA: None of it has ever shown up anywhere?

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Not one thing.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Not one thing.

MS. FORESTA: Thing.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Not one thing.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Not in a flea market. Well, we don't go to—can you see one of those things in a flea market? [Laughs.]

MS. FORESTA: Well, anyway, Bill did rebuild it.

MS. FORESTA: And you should.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: And it came back stronger than ever, but there were some of those pieces I never could

reconstruct. You can't mimic—there's no—you've don't get any satisfaction out of mimicking something.

MS. FORESTA: But its later incarnation seems to also have evolved into other resonances. We've talked about the photographs, the dream buildings, the even more abstracted constructions.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Well, the Klan dolls became more abstract too—

MS. FORESTA: Yeah, exactly.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: —because Bill went and did—

MS. FORESTA: Ah, that's right.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: —workshop at the Philadelphia—I mean The Fabric Workshop in Philadelphia, and the dolls that came out of that were extraordinary.

MS. FORESTA: Yes, those—yes, the sandbag dolls.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Right, all different. They were—

MS. FORESTA: Oh, those were—those were beauties.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Mounting wire and pierced with pins and dripped with wax and all kinds of things.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: I was mad then. [They laugh.]

MS. FORESTA: Were you mad?

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: No. Somebody stole my dolls. [They laugh.]

MS. FORESTA: Well, you're probably getting tired. And let me just see if there are any other questions that we can answer easily as part of this. And I'm going to leave out the question, how do you define documentary photography—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Hallelujah.

MS. FORESTA: —because I like you. [They laugh.]

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Well, when you come back—when you come back and we drink a lot of wine or whatever, then I'll tell you.

MS. FORESTA: [Laughs.] Then we'll get into that.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: I'll deal with that.

MS. FORESTA: The only thing that I'm going to ask you is one more question—is that do you think photography, as you've known it, has changed in such a profound way that you wouldn't be—you would not be as interested in it if you were encountering it today as you were when you had a simple Brownie camera back—way back when, when the dinosaurs roamed the Earth?

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: I think I understand the question.

It was so fresh to me at that time. Sometimes I think some issues are taken too far, further than they should be taken. And I'm not talking about controversial work. Pop Art, at its beginning, was very important, but it just wore me down after a while—not just Warhol. Warhol deserves so much credit for bringing that about.

But, no, I really didn't think of any of that work in the context of, how shall I say, making art, but it was a way, sort of, of purging myself of something I felt I had to do, and albeit privately.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: You're talking about the Klan work now, aren't you?

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

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Well, Merry is talking about something else.

MS. FORESTA: Well, I was talking about photography in general, but it sounds like the Klan work was something that was a sort of profound aspect of what we're talking about in that it was—you had to purge it—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: It was—

MS. FORESTA: —in terms of its imaging. And I wonder if, when you first were picking up the camera, and the Brownie—and, as you said, you were going out into the landscape and seeing things, not so much purging but it was a way of more personally snapping, literally, these pictures that were very personal, the pictures.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Very personal, and things that really were very close to my heart.

MS. FORESTA: And that you might not today since we've gone through—I mean since photography is so profoundly present in everything we do, and it has become such a dominant medium of the art world, you might not have felt that you could be that personal with it again. I mean, I don't want to put words in your mouth but I'm just wondering if that might be the case.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Well, I would agree with what you just said. I'm not—I don't think this adds to what we were talking about, but I've not made a Klan piece in years, except that one doll that—

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: The glass doll.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: The glass doll, the solid glass doll, and then the doll that—the inside-out doll, which I think is one of the best pieces—

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Yeah, but you did that in, like, the '80s.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Yeah, that was—you know the dolls that's—

MS. FORESTA: Oh, yeah, I love that. That's—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: You know what? This is a slight change of subject. [Phone rings]. Tell them we've already eaten and we're drinking now.

[Telephone conversation.]

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Speaking of that, I have a visitor's pass. Do you want me to put it on your windshield so you don't get a ticket?

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Well, will they get one at night?

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Oh, yeah. They've extended their parking—

[Audio break.]

MS. FORESTA: So, the Klan is at more of a standstill. Have you been doing any photography lately?

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: I'm embarrassed to tell you, my dear friend, that the last four years my involvement with the camera has been minimal because my parents are gone and we don't stay as long as we used to. That's when I used to be very productive with photographing.

MS. FORESTA: So it's fair to say that in more recent years you have photographed solely down in Alabama, outside, and have done very—you've done no, what I'll call studio work, which was the Klan work.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Oh, no, no, I—well, you're right, I have not done any Klan work in, lord have mercy, a long, long time.

MS. FORESTA: To photograph them.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Yeah, but the landscape work—

MS. FORESTA: And so the photography has been—the photography has been all down in Alabama. Is that—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Always.

MS. FORESTA: Always. And you haven't gone in a few years. Yeah.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Well, you do have some photographs that are taken around in Washington.

MS. FORESTA: Oh.

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: In fact, there was a nice series that is at Baker Hostetler [Washington, D.C.] of

Washington, only Washington scenes.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Which camera? [Inaudible]—camera?

MRS. CHRISTENBERRY: Mostly Brownies, I think—Brownies. Yeah.

MS. FORESTA: Great.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: I must admit, I have—on a beautiful day like today, I walk down past my old studio, as I said earlier, and I think, oh, I should bring a camera sometime. You now, Mr. [Lee] Friedlander is never without his camera. Never.

MS. FORESTA: I know.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: He would be naked without his camera. [Laughs.]

MS. FORESTA: I know.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: He'd take off all his clothes and keep his camera and work. [They laugh.] Oh, that's a wonderful man.

MS. FORESTA: All right, I'm going to close this—

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Cut me off?

MS. FORESTA: I'm closing this interview, and we'll come back for round three at a later date.

MR. CHRISTENBERRY: Ooh, round three. Three is my favorite number. Maybe that will be a good one.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

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