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Oral history interview with Lillian Bassman,
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Lillian Bassman on 2011 October 4–29. The interview took place at Bassman's home and studio in New York, NY, and was conducted by Steven Watson for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

LILLIAN BASSMAN: What are you listening for?

STEPHEN WATSON: To make sure it's on.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Oh, I see.

STEVEN WATSON: Okay.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: That voice sounds funny to me.

STEVEN WATSON: You know, so in general—whoa—[inaudible, audio interference]—

So first of all—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: You're—

[Side conversation.]

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Do you need anything?

STEVEN WATSON: No.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Do you need anything from Steve?

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: I heard—I heard something, so I just came to check.

STEVEN WATSON: No, we're fine.

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: Okay. [Laughs.]

STEVEN WATSON: You know, we just dropped—so typical.

Okay. So today Steven Watson is interviewing Lillian Bassman on October 4th, 2011 at her home and studio at 117 East 83rd Street, correct?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Right.

STEVEN WATSON: Okay. So I want to start out with before you were born.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Okay.

STEVEN WATSON: You know, your parents—I want to know about them and how you came to be. So tell me something, your parents' names, where they came from.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I'll give you his American name, Julius Bassman. He came from Vilnius, I think. I'm not too sure of that. He arrived when he was 18, 19, went to Cornell—yes, to their—I think that was their agricultural component—

STEVEN WATSON: Yeah, there's a Cornell—yeah.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: The agricultural school. And I don't know what he really intended to do, whether he was going to be a farmer. Who knows? He met my mother, who was 15 years old. They started to live together in Connecticut. He—I don't think he ever finished the agricultural school, but they started a farm.

My mother was 15 years old and terrified of being alone on this farm. And being a new farmer, I guess he had to go to town to pick up seeds or whatever a farmer has to do. [Laughs.] She just couldn't bear being alone on the farm, and so it didn't last very long—all right, long enough for her to become pregnant and give birth to my sister, who was four years older than I am.

STEVEN WATSON: Who I have met.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Oh, have you?

STEVEN WATSON: Yes, at one of your Christmas gatherings or something. I want to say Sonny, but her—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Yeah, you're right.

STEVEN WATSON: Her real name was—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Sophie, I think. I don't know, I always—throughout my life, I knew her as Sonny, never anything different. Yeah, I guess it was Sophie.

Anyway, because she was so terrified of being on the farm alone at night, he gave up the farm. And I guess—I'm not sure. They settled in—I know that at some point they all lived in New Haven. I don't know how long they stayed there.

STEVEN WATSON: That's not a farm area, though.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: No. No, I mean—out—[inaudible]—somewhere.

STEVEN WATSON: They were out—they were in—outside of—okay.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I have no—I have no notion of where—you know, what the—all I know is they landed in New Haven. And I wonder what happened after that. My sister was born on that farm. They were in New Haven, and somehow or other, they moved to Brooklyn. I don't know what the transformation was. I'm not too aware of that.

STEVEN WATSON: Do you think your father was upset about not pursuing farming?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: My father was so involved with my mother. [Laughs.] Who knows what upset him more than anything else? This is a man who should not have been that much in love with a woman like my mother, but he was. And so they moved to Brooklyn. I don't know how—what happened in the three or four years between my sister's birth and mine. They must have been in New Haven. And about—anyway, they moved to Brooklyn. And I was born in Brooklyn, on Church Avenue.

STEVEN WATSON: So Church Avenue and what? Or what—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Church Avenue—I don't know. Church Avenue in Brooklyn, which goes on forever. [They laugh.] I think it's somewhere near Coney Island, but I'm not sure. I think it's all the way at the end of Church Avenue.

I was never there in my lucid years. I think they quickly moved to the Bronx. My father became a master housepainter, a great craftsman. He—I don't know where he learned his trade, actually, but he did become a super-duper housepainter. Nowadays they would call him a decorator, but in those days he was just an ordinary housepainter.

STEVEN WATSON: But he had a visual eye?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I don't know, he—[coughs]—excuse me—he must have, because he worked in the most exclusive Park Avenue apartments doing major walls, you know. Yeah, I guess—I guess he was really an excellent craftsman. He became a contractor, I guess. And anyway, till the end of his days, I guess, he was a contractor. I don't—I don't think he ever in the last 30 years of his life handled a paintbrush or anything. But he knew his trade. And—

STEVEN WATSON: Would he be involved with selecting colors, in terms of contracting?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: He never really discussed that.

STEVEN WATSON: Okay. You know, I'm not trying to be too specific—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: No, I know. No—

STEVEN WATSON: —but I'm trying to get, you know, where your visual—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Well, you have to come back to my mother. Now, I don't know how this developed for her. She was young, beautiful and—not if you looked at pictures of her now. You wouldn't think of it, but I think she must have had that kind of personality that overcame the—you know, the physical attributes. But anyway, she was—

STEVEN WATSON: You mean her personality was—she was radiant?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Yeah, she was—I don't know. She was—

STEVEN WATSON: I'm not trying to put words in your mouth.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Yeah, that's all right. You do that. She was 100 percent flirtatious. I guess being married very young, not having had a social life, having children too early, she began to feel her oats when she matured a little bit. Men paid attention to her. She was 100 percent female, flirtatious. If she had been able to be unmarried and not have children, I think she would have succeeded in today's kind of image of that—but you know, how old was she? In her twenties? Having two children, having a husband for years—that's a long time being saddled and married. And anyway—

STEVEN WATSON: Yeah. How much older was your father?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Ten years.

STEVEN WATSON: Okay.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Enough to make a big difference.

STEVEN WATSON: Yeah. And she was born in this country?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Odessa.

STEVEN WATSON: Odessa, okay.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: She came here when she was, I think, 13—no, 15, I think.

STEVEN WATSON: Okay, and I am guessing that the fact that your father came here and went to Cornell—he came from a somewhat good family?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Oh, yeah. I think he had a good education. Why would he come to America? I think because of the 1905 revolution. I'm not sure if they—

STEVEN WATSON: Oh, okay, yeah.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I think—you know, I think because of the political life in Vilnius, being Jewish, lots of problems. Anyway, he came to America. He came with his sisters. I don't—I don't know of their early life. I only know of his sisters in connection with his living in Connecticut. They both lived in Connecticut.

STEVEN WATSON: So they were somewhat upper-class, or upper—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Not upper-class, upper—intellectual—his sister ended up on the—oh, what do you call it? I'll think of it. Too bad—

STEVEN WATSON: Okay. You don't—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I don't know. I don't—

STEVEN WATSON: Okay, part of the—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I know what I'm thinking about, but I can't think of the word for it.

His other—that was the older sister. The younger sister—who I think of as the older sister, but she wasn't—married a Russian muzhik. [They laugh.] Anyway, he was a big, burly man; she was a little, wizened lady—a terrible combination. He eventually ended up working for my father, who he—who hated each other, but my father felt that he had to do something for his sister, who he loved.

So this crazy Russian man was in our life a lot. But my father put up with him for years and years because of his sister. My father was a caretaker, really. That was his role in society when they lived in Brooklyn and then when they moved to the Bronx. He took care of every needy person that they knew. He was always involved with taking care of somebody, some family, somehow.

STEVEN WATSON: And does that mean financially, primarily, or emotionally?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: In some way financially, you know, but nobody had money. I mean, it was nickels and dimes. But he took care of lots and lots of people. He was that kind of a man. And so I mean, imagine a man like that married to a bon vivant. I mean, she wanted to dance; she wanted to play. She wanted to live like—and he didn't dance. I mean, emotionally, spiritually, she wanted to dance and play, and she did, you know.

She—I'm sure she had countless lovers, unless she was just a big flirt. I don't know. I have no proof at that period. I know that she flirted wildly. There were men who came and kissed her hands and played the piano with her and, you know, paid attention to her. What she did, I don't know, at that point. I know what she did later in life when I was involved with her and her lover.

You know, but that—in the intervening years, I think she played, but I don't know if there was anything serious about what she did. I know one man, a dentist that used to torture me, who was a very handsome, big guy who she had something to do with, but she always claimed that her friend was his lover. I don't know. That I don't know.

STEVEN WATSON: Right. So one thing, you know, that I think is very important is the setup of—I think your parents were bohemian in some ways.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Oh, absolutely.

STEVEN WATSON: And so to me, that's very important to understand what that is. And, you know, later we'll talk about your growing up in that kind of background. But at that time your father was very hardworking. He was a caretaker. Your mother was a bon vivant. How—in what ways were they bohemian?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: In their lifestyle. I can only tell you what the house looked like: sofas on the floor, two feet high, one foot high, low, paisley covers, you know, not rich paisley, but cotton paisley on the floors. Sofas didn't exist. Pillows on the floor. I'm trying to think—I don't know what kind of a table we ate at, but I remember that meals consisted of huge bowls of salad, 10 or 15 people around the table, people who sort of strolled in, friends of my mother's, my friends—well, not my friends, but young friends. There'd be a big bowl of maybe vegetables. I don't remember meats of any kind, though there may have been.

Everybody would sit around the table. I would bring in—a little older, as I grew older I would bring in maybe a friend or two. My sister would bring in friends. My mother always had some person that she was giving a home to, some young woman who was trying to get a job in New York, some stray or—did my father have any friends around the table? I don't really remember, because there were all these people always, you know, eating whatever was around.

STEVEN WATSON: So it was very open in terms of—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Yeah.

STEVEN WATSON: —many people being around.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: My mother always had some stray from New Haven who was either looking for a job or going to school or something. My father always had some relative that he was trying to help, some friend. I don't know. It was open house, you know?

STEVEN WATSON: Yeah. Yeah.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Younger, when we lived in this apartment, my sister and I were sort of nudists. We always ran around naked—never any restrictions of any kind.

STEVEN WATSON: That was—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: On the other hand, I think I only saw my father nude once. He didn't—he didn't join into that kind of open living that we did.

STEVEN WATSON: Would you say your father was different from your mother in terms of bohemianism? It's not an "ism," but—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Yeah, well, he had to be. He was—you know, he went to work at 5:00 or 6:00 in the morning, and didn't come back until way late, you know, and—

STEVEN WATSON: Way late is 7:00, or—like, what?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Could be 7[:00], 8[:00], 9[:00], you know.

STEVEN WATSON: Oh, okay.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: But he left in the morning before we, as children, got up, you know? I guess my mother being young and not wanting to—I don't know what her thought was, but my sister and I were brought up to be very—just independent. And I remember, at a very early age I made my own breakfast, prepared whatever I had to, got myself dressed. We had—as years went on, there were certain very rigid rules that didn't exist during the day. Saturdays were clean-up day: You cleaned your room; you washed your hair; you did your laundry. I was going to this—later on, I was in public school. I was going to a school where you had to wear midi blouses. My job always, as I remember, was to take care of my own shirts—to iron them. I don't know, we were taught to do certain specific jobs. I remember we always cleaned our own rooms. As I say, I had to iron my own midi blouses.

STEVEN WATSON: Yeah.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: You try that. Woop!

STEVEN WATSON: [Laughs.]

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I hated that job, you know. Anyway, started—

STEVEN WATSON: Was your mother interested in clothes?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: For herself?

STEVEN WATSON: Yeah.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I don't really remember. Later on, you know, when I—when I stopped wearing midi blouses, I remember her fitting clothing on me—fitting dresses. I remember the battles: "You're not making it tight enough." "You're not making it tight enough!" "Take that waistline in more."

STEVEN WATSON: [Laughs.]

LILLIAN BASSMAN: It was a constant battle. "Take it in tighter!" You know, but I don't know how much of a seamstress she was, but—

STEVEN WATSON: But she made the clothes?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Yeah, at that point. You know—yeah, I certainly didn't make them. I don't know whether—I don't remember buying very much. The only—the only thing I remember having bought was when my father took me to a department store to buy a coat. And he kept—he wanted me not to tell my mother how much he was spending on this coat, because she wouldn't approve. But he was, you know, anxious for me to have what I wanted and what he thought was good. But we were not supposed to tell my mother. That's the only thing I remember having to do with him and clothing.

STEVEN WATSON: Okay. Okay.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: All of these ages are sort of jumbled up.

STEVEN WATSON: I know. I know. I know. I know.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I keep going back and forth.

STEVEN WATSON: But, you know, I'm a little bit curious, you know, because later you became so involved with fashion—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: With clothing, right.

STEVEN WATSON: —and clothing. You know, whether seeing your mother making clothes, whether—you know, whether there was anything you absorbed. You know, if not; not. But anything you have to say about that.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I don't know, I keep thinking of Isadora Duncan while you're talking, because she was the major image in my head. And of course, all that flowing clothing made a big impression on me, you know, they flowed in me. I don't know, my—where did my involvement with clothing begin? Almost from the very beginning, from when I would argue with my mother about how tight the waistline should be, how flowing the line should be.

Did it all stem from my vision of Isadora floating? I used to dance like that. I always played with scarfs like that. I

remember dancing around, with scarfs flowing all around me—very involved with how she looked and how she moved, how everything flowed around her. I don't know what age that started. It must have been fairly early, because as children we were somehow involved with Isadora Duncan. She was a major, major figure in our life. Why?

STEVEN WATSON: Why? And how? I mean, how did you even know about her? She was dead when you were very young.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Yeah.

STEVEN WATSON: But you—I mean, I'll shut up.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: No, no, no. I—help me. [Laughs.] I—

STEVEN WATSON: Well, I'm just thinking, she died when you were quite young.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Yeah.

STEVEN WATSON: Do you think you saw her in the movies? Do you think you saw her in photographs?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Dancing?

STEVEN WATSON: Yeah.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Not Isadora, but maybe her sister.

STEVEN WATSON: Her sister, or the—or the Isadorables?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: [Laughs.] I'm old, I'm afraid. Yeah, somehow.

STEVEN WATSON: Fascinating!

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Did my mother—my mother must have brought us to that, because I don't think my father was involved in that kind of thing. My sister and I were very involved when we were—what?—we must have been very early teens—with the Red Dance Group. The offshoots, I guess, of the Duncan school. Now, where that came from, I don't know. But my sister and I both landed in that kind of dance world. I stayed in it much longer than she did. I was on my way to becoming a Martha Graham dancer, but then I hurt my leg and my ankle or something. Anyway, that career got finished. I cried and cried and cried, and then realized that I would never be a dancer. My legs were just not made for it. But I went through it for—

STEVEN WATSON: Did you know that before you had the ankle trouble?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: That I wouldn't be?

STEVEN WATSON: Yeah.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: No.

STEVEN WATSON: No.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: No, no. No, that got nixed with the—with the fact that I would never be a dancer.

STEVEN WATSON: You know, to be interested in both Isadora Duncan and Martha Graham at that point, that's very advanced.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: [Laughs.]

STEVEN WATSON: I don't know if that's the right word, but it's not the obvious.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Well, I'm trying—I don't know how it happened, maybe being part of a kind of a left-wing movement. The Red Dance Group was very important.

STEVEN WATSON: The which? The—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Red Dance Group.

STEVEN WATSON: Okay. The Red Dance Group?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Yeah.

STEVEN WATSON: I don't even know what that is. Do you mean red, as in leftist?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Yeah.

STEVEN WATSON: Oh, okay. Okay.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: No, not the color. [Laughs.] No, red—yeah, leftist. We were part of that whole leftist movement. Somewhere along the line, they were communists. Now, whether we were communists or whether my father was a communist, I don't think anybody was ever a member of the Communist Party. But certainly, it was always left-wing movement.

STEVEN WATSON: Did you ever go to any of the leftist summer camps or any of—or the kind of meetings or those kind of things?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: [Laughs.] I remember a very funny situation. I was sent to a left-wing communist camp where they spoke Jewish. I had never spoken Jewish. I didn't know anything about the Jewish religion or the— in my home, they spoke Russian. Now, why they sent me to this Jewish camp, I don't know. I landed there one day; there was some kind of an interaction; either I decided or they decided I was not to be. I was sent home immediately. I neither spoke Jewish nor understood Jewish. What or why I had been sent to a Jewish camp, I have no idea. I didn't even last a day and they sent me home, you know—you know, I couldn't communicate with anybody.

STEVEN WATSON: [Laughs.] You would have been in, probably, early teens?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: No, no—

STEVEN WATSON: Or younger?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Younger, I think. No, early teens, I could have handled it. No, I was much younger. It was—

STEVEN WATSON: Okay.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: —I just didn't understand any point of it. How I got there, I'll never know, you know, why anybody would send me there. Anyway, one day, and I was gone.

STEVEN WATSON: Got it. Got it.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: To this day, I don't understand Jewish spoken language—not that I understand Russian either, but I'm tutored.

STEVEN WATSON: But Russian was spoken at home?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Oh yeah, but spoken—you know how parents speak. They have their private language. They speak Russian so that you shouldn't understand what they are saying.

STEVEN WATSON: Okay. Okay.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: So I'm clueless. No language. I can't speak French; can't speak Italian; can't speak Jewish.

STEVEN WATSON: Were—did you think that your family and your household were—you know, I keep using this word "bohemian." Did they seem different from those of your friends?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Oh, absolutely. Absolutely.

STEVEN WATSON: Oh yeah—oh, so say more.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I had—I had a friend whose father was something big in the synagogue. Their life was a complete mystery to me. I remember once I came to the kitchen with my friend Francie's [ph] mother, and she was beating up some eggs, and she asked me to hand her a spoon. And I gave her the wrong spoon. And she threw out these 12 eggs, and I was horrified—absolutely horrified: You threw out 12 eggs, you know. But they were religious in a way that I had no concept of.

Also, I hated her father who was, I thought, a very cruel and angry man, who had no patience for his children. And this, to me, was sort of symbolic of that kind of family and religion: the mother who was very docile and threw out 12 eggs. And, I don't know, it was—I couldn't fathom that whole kind—that whole concept of religion. It seemed despicable to me—something mean about it, or something ungenerous, you know, not very loving, not—

anyway. How did I digress to this?

STEVEN WATSON: Well, I was talking about the Jewish thing and about whether your house was different from your friends'.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Totally different. Totally, totally different. There was so much charm in my house. All the young people who came, all my mother's friends who came to be helped to go to—helped to go to school, to go into other professions; and then this mean, religious little group, but my dear friend, who I adored, had to live with—mean brothers. I mean, they were nasty to each other. The brothers were terrible to this girl. My sister couldn't have been sweeter. You know, she would take me anywhere, let me join with any of her friends. I mean, it was—one part was so easy and sort of communal; and then my friend who lived in this tight, nasty—I mean—

STEVEN WATSON: Do you—were you aware that you had a special childhood?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Well, when I looked at Francie [ph] and her life, and I looked at mine, I had to be aware. Mine was full of love and giving, and my father took care of so many people; my mother was flirting with so many nice people; I was allowed to roam around nude and play and dance. And then there's this tight-fisted group—

STEVEN WATSON: Well—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I had to be aware.

STEVEN WATSON: I am thinking, you know, given what you later did, there's this early embrace of your body, which seems very important—whether it's nudity or dancing, it's about the body. Does that make sense?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Absolutely.

STEVEN WATSON: And that the body is something to not be afraid of—but, again, I want your words, not mine.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Well, to enjoy, to take pleasure in your ability to move, to express yourself, to—and for those around you. I mean, it's—the way I took to certain models who felt their bodies grow and express, you know—maybe they weren't as aware of it as I was, but I gravitated to those that had that feeling.

STEVEN WATSON: And I'm imagining that you engendered a freedom with their body because you appreciated that.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I think so. If you ever saw me on a set—not now that I'm 94, but when I photographed for real, you know, on my feet—the moment I got interested in what I was doing, my shoes went off. I would get on the paper, dance barefoot, dance for the models, move in the way I wanted them to move, really dance barefoot in front of the camera, take on the body movements that I felt would get them to move—actually to dance in front of the camera.

STEVEN WATSON: Do you think any other photographers did that?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: [Laughs.] I didn't watch other photographers. Paul didn't do that. I did.

STEVEN WATSON: I just want to tell one brief story about my family. We were—nudity was totally accepted. And we always went on camping trips in the summer, often places where no one was around, and we would go nude swimming. And I remember my mother taking our clothes off, and she said, "Now, remember boys, your bodies are beautiful." She wasn't demonstrative or a dancer or anything like that, but there was this kind of, "Remember boys, your bodies are beautiful." And I never forgot that. It's a good—it's a good message. And so you got that message.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Yeah, yeah.

STEVEN WATSON: And your sister got that message. Okay.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: My sister was extraordinarily beautiful. I was the monkey in the family; she was a beauty. They used to follow her in the street. But she never had my kind of assurance. Funny: She was really, really beautiful; she could have been "the thing" in Hollywood. She never had a sense of herself in that respect. I don't understand it, but—and she had every opportunity of—trying to think of the name of the actor who followed her.

STEVEN WATSON: Give me a hint.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I don't—I don't know.

STEVEN WATSON: Okay.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I'll think of it.

STEVEN WATSON: I know.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I don't know where I got my self-possession. As a—as a—well, I was a girl, but as a woman, say, I certainly always realized—as a matter of fact, they used to call me the monkey in the house. She was so beautiful that anything other than her was a monkey. And I'm sure I was sort of a monkey. But I always was very self-possessed about my own femaleness, my own sense of attraction to men. I don't know where those came from, but it was—

STEVEN WATSON: Do you think in some way it connects with your mother?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: No.

STEVEN WATSON: No.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: No.

STEVEN WATSON: I mean, it's interesting—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: It's curious to me now. I never thought of it that way. My sister, who was so beautiful, never had it; and I, who was called the monkey in the house, always had it. I always had a sense of my own ability to attract boys, men.

STEVEN WATSON: Were you aware of your intelligence?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: No. [Laughs.] I was never intelligent. I was a kid who was sort of flunking out of school—not flunking. I had great—a great knack of pretending intellect where I didn't have it. I remember in high school, where I knew no grammar—I don't know what happened to my schooling. I was—I didn't fit. But I read and I imitated and I developed a style in school without punctuation, without knowledge of grammar, that imitated the best-known writers of the day.

And so it was—it was a joke, really, because I knew no grammar. But I could write in this free-flowing—that sort of led my teachers to think I knew more than I knew. To this day, I have no knowledge about grammar, but—well, I didn't get very far in school, but I—[laughs]—I got far enough with this sort of pseudo-intellectualism that's really not based on anything except the ability to absorb the talent. Anyway, I got away with murder at that time.

STEVEN WATSON: Well, fascinating that you like to read. Reading was important to you.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Not really.

STEVEN WATSON: Okay.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Not really. I read, but I—you know, when I watch Eric now, I think, "Where the hell did he get it?" Maybe from Paul. Paul is very different. Paul took his education very seriously. He went through college; he got one master's; he got another master's.

I couldn't get through night school. He sent me to—he sent me to Columbia. I couldn't get through the material, you know. Two weeks in, I realized I couldn't read fast enough. To this day, I can't imagine why I didn't take—and I always said I was going to do it, but never did it—take a reading course. I—to this day, I read every word—the "a," the "the," the comma.

STEVEN WATSON: Okay, I'm not going to try to convince you of this—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: But—

STEVEN WATSON: —but now there are people who'd say, you know, there's many kinds of intelligences, and visual intelligence is one of them, and movement intelligence is another one of those. And I suspect, you know, you have those kinds of intelligence, which are—it's not IQ intelligence.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Right. Yeah.

STEVEN WATSON: So what would you say were—

[END OF AUDIO TRACK AAA_bassma11_1124.]

STEVEN WATSON: [In progress]—your strong—you know, your strengths.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: It's hard to say. I never doubted my visual sense. I doubted my intellectual sense, my inability to read the way Eric does or like Paul did. I didn't have the educational skills to back up anything that they have. On the other hand, I have a very good sense of how to deal with everyday life. It was my career. I certainly had plenty of ups and downs in that career. I managed to surmount most of them. I found my niche.

I guess I always had sort of total respect and jealousy, maybe, about Paul's abilities in that sense and Eric's.

What, dear?

MS. : I want to just make sure you don't need oxygen. I can hook her up with—I just—can I just check? Since she's talking—

STEVEN WATSON: Sure. Yeah, yeah.

MS. : —she exudes more—

STEVEN WATSON: Okay. So you—

MS. : Just—I'm just going stick something on her finger. And then if she's low, I'm just going to give her a different kind of—I'm sorry to interrupt, but it's—[inaudible].

STEVEN WATSON: No problem.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: That's all right. It's a good time.

MS. : Is it?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Yeah.

MS. : Because you're allowed to go without it as long as you're not below 88. And I can put up—Steven, I can —

LILLIAN BASSMAN: But I can wear—

MS. : No, no. I can wear—I can do a quieter one, you know? You can do the tank, Mom, because I can refill it and it's much quieter.

Now, you're fine. Yeah, you're fine. Do you feel like you need it? Are you getting heavy, or are you getting stupid?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: No.

MS. : Steven, if she—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: If I'm getting stupid—

MS. : If she's getting stupid, it might because she's used to more oxygen.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: But I—

MS. : But no, I'm just saying. So you just tell me.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: [Inaudible]—because I'm—[inaudible]—

MS. : You—no, no, but it's loud.

STEVEN WATSON: [Inaudible.]

MS. : No, so—here, no, no. So I'll just this one. Mom, this is much quieter. It won't be the compressing sound. I mean, this is the portable one. You can refill it later. Gives you just as much, and—

It's just that she—it—

[END OF AUDIO TRACK AAA_bassma11_1125.]

STEVEN WATSON: Okay. So picking up, we were talking about, you had complete confidence in your visual ability and in your body, and you found your niche.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

STEVEN WATSON: Can—is there a way of sort of moving from your childhood to how you found your niche? I mean, the niche—some of it is later, but I'm talking about your development because—first of all, that a lot of women just thought, "I'm going to get married and have children, and that's my life."

LILLIAN BASSMAN: [Chuckles.]

STEVEN WATSON: And that wasn't your vision.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: No. As a matter of fact, before I met Paul—I must have been 12 or 13, living—still living on Crotona Park East, and I was—remember there was a young boy who lived in the house, in the apartment house. His name was Paul Giorno—the most beautiful, beautiful—had the most wonderful, velvety colored eyes. Anyway, we were lying out somewhere. There—we were facing a park at that time, and we must have been lying on the grass. And we were talking, and he began to tell me what he expected of life: that he would be married, have several children. And I looked at him and I thought, "You've got to be crazy. What kind of life is that? There isn't anything you want to achieve, anything you want to do that's special?"

I remember thinking, "This beautiful boy with the velvet eyes is so fucking boring! He hasn't a thought in his head. All he can think of is that someday he's going to be married. That can't be. That's no life, being always—got to be something going on that's exciting. Just being married is—that's no answer. What do you want? What do you need? What do you want to dream about?" Anyway, that was the end of him. I had been so intrigued by his beauty that it never occurred to me that anyone that beautiful could be that fucking boring. Anyway, that finished that little instant. How I got to that, I don't know. But then—

STEVEN WATSON: So you had dreams then.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I must have.

STEVEN WATSON: So you're maybe 13, 14?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Yeah.

STEVEN WATSON: Okay. Uh-huh [affirmative].

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Well, and then that was the time that I was becoming interested in the dance group and in politics and, you know, a broader vision of what life was like.

STEVEN WATSON: I'm going to put this down here, because it—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Oh, I'm sorry.

STEVEN WATSON: It's fine; it just gets in the way of the microphone.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Oh. I didn't realize she put it there.

STEVEN WATSON: Yeah. That's fine.

Okay. So—yeah, so you had dreams. You were thinking about dancing. You were—you had—were thinking about politics. And what politics would—I know it would—leftist, but what form?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Well, it was the Great Depression. There were the homeless; there were the needy; there were the blacks; there were the lynchings in the South; there was "Hooverville"; there was Roosevelt. We were great champions of Roosevelt's. He was going to be the savior at that time. So that we were genuinely aware of the poverty, of the—of the need, the social need to make a change, and our perception, I guess, at the time that it would be a left-wing movement.

Now, did this come from the family? I'm not sure. It came from involvement in the dance movement. Certainly, my father was aware and, you know, not actively involved but inclined towards the left-wing movement. Where he got it from, whether it was from his student days in Vilna—and I'm sure that he was active then—I don't know.

STEVEN WATSON: Did it go more left than Roosevelt?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Not actively. I mean, I don't know about Paul. I think maybe Paul was more—but that was—Paul came later, so, I mean—

STEVEN WATSON: Okay. You mentioned—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Not for me.

STEVEN WATSON: What?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Not for me.

STEVEN WATSON: Okay. Yeah. You talked about the black people. Were there black people in your life? No.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: No. This is purely left-wing awareness of the black situation.

STEVEN WATSON: Did you have an awareness of the beauty of the black body and face, or was that—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Well, I don't know how old I was. There was a black dancer that I felt was the most glorious man that ever was—not that I had too much to do with him. I mean, he sort of pooh-poohed me—[inaudible]—I was a little too young. But he was sensationally beautiful.

But this—the situation with the black community and the black situation was sort of—the feeling was sort of native to me, to be aware of them, to feel their stresses, to want to do something about it, to go on marches, to—you know, I don't know where it came from, but it was there all the time. I mean, this was not something that was discussed in the family. It was just part of our awareness of human beings.

STEVEN WATSON: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. I'm curious, and I'm going to jump a little bit—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Oh, sure.

STEVEN WATSON: —to your visual awareness at that time, what you were seeing. I know you were seeing things on the street. I don't know if you were seeing movies. I don't know if you were seeing magazines. I don't know if you were seeing art. But what—you know, I'm—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Well, the art came with Paul—what was I? Eighteen.

STEVEN WATSON: Okay.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Our life—maybe because we had no money; maybe it's where our interest was. Paul and I spent every weekend going to the Metropolitan Museum. We would walk from 14th Street up to the museum; spend the day going through the galleries; spend Friday and Saturday night at the museum when they had concerts—and they had them all the time. They had the garden—you know, it was not a garden, but—and we'd sit there and listen to music at night. But during the day, we always did the galleries together. We almost always, I would think, agreed on what we saw. At that time, we were in love with El Greco—you know, various art forms at different times. But our whole education—my—I don't know about Paul's whole—my education was in the rooms at the—at the museum. That's where I learned about fashion, or I learned about color, or I learned about history. I can name the rooms that we were in, that we—it's where I got my whole visual education in fashion, in design, in paint and art.

STEVEN WATSON: Primarily by looking at paintings. Because there was no fashion place.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: No. Oh, no. No fashion. But fashion in painting: Every century, every year, you know, had its visual importance. And I knew from that how clothing was constructed, how it moved or—I mean, how can you look at hundreds and hundreds of paintings in different eras and not know how that clothing developed, how it—the one thing I could never figure out is how they starched those neck pieces but—that came later, you know. But I knew how to construct a piece of clothing, from seeing and absorbing.

STEVEN WATSON: Were there any particular eras that you were drawn to? You know, take that anywhere you want—to artists or eras. Or was it just one large—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: No. I think it depended on my education, in looking at these things, what I could absorb and what I learned from one generation to another in the way of construction, color, adaptability of fashion, of movement. Paintings can tell you a lot. And I learned a lot about body movement, about hand movement, about eye gesture, about—[inaudible]—gesture. It's a good education.

STEVEN WATSON: Now, this would be mostly aristocrats or upper-class people in the paintings?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: No. No.

STEVEN WATSON: No? No? I'm wrong?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: You're wrong. No, they were burghers and, you know, house dwellers—different cultural

groups. You know, the aristocrats, the animals that they used, that they kept—not too much, I mean, about the things that smell generate for you; I mean, not the smells of cooking or, you know, of daily living. I mean, you can—you can sort of tell what it's like to learn in a formal—10 people in a room, as opposed to these aristocrats that you saw in the museum. But even there, you got a sense of the different levels of society.

STEVEN WATSON: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Were you making any clothes at that time?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: No.

STEVEN WATSON: No. Now—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I was always aware of what I put on my body. You know, like I had a cape that somebody brought from Europe that must have been a hundred years old, that I used to wear over—you know, overflowing blouses that came down to your navel. But I was pretty keen on dress-up at certain points.

STEVEN WATSON: And that would be bought?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: No.

STEVEN WATSON: No.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Never bought. I think I bought one dress in my lifetime. Oh, I must say what I bought. I bought blue jeans in the—what do they call them? I'm trying to think of the shop's name.

STEVEN WATSON: You know, we can—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I bought things. I never bought a dress. I bought this one dress, as I said, and that's about it. I mean, I bought shirts in this—I wore things from the Salvation Army. I was always interested in clothing, but that didn't mean that I—and I made a lot of very exotic outfits for myself. But I never bought anything—let's say this one dress, which I never wore.

STEVEN WATSON: What was this dress like?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: It was a straw-woven dress.

STEVEN WATSON: Straw-woven? Literally?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Beautiful. It was—it made a great hanging piece. [Laughs.] I never wore it. It was—why I bought it, I don't know. I certainly never wore it.

STEVEN WATSON: And was this later on? '40s? '50s?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: '50s.

STEVEN WATSON: Ah. Okay. Okay. Was it unusual for women to wear jeans at that time?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Yeah—mid century. I know that I was kept out of a lot of restaurants for wearing them. [Laughs.] By then, I was working—no—well, when I worked at Harper's Bazaar—I'm trying to think of what I wore. I remember once dyeing a pair of socks—stockings—blue, and wearing them to work. And Mrs. Vreeland, who was the chief fashion editor at that time, was very curious about where they came from, and I kept saying I just dyed a pair of socks.

I don't know what I wore to the Bazaar. By that time, I must have—by the time I started to work at the Bazaar, I must have made some skirts and wore shirts with it. I certainly never bought a dress, so I must have worn stuff that I made for myself, I think.

STEVEN WATSON: Skirts at that time that you made, would they be below the knee?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Yeah.

STEVEN WATSON: Mid—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Yeah.

STEVEN WATSON: —kind of mid—what do we say, mid-shin?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Mid-calf.

STEVEN WATSON: Mid-calf. That's what—okay. Uh-huh [affirmative].

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I'm trying to visualize what I wore when I worked with Brodovitch—certainly, nothing memorable. Shirts, I'm sure, like the one I'm wearing.

STEVEN WATSON: So there were men's shirts and women's shirts?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: No—since I didn't buy any. I don't know, maybe I just wore tank tops or turtlenecks.

STEVEN WATSON: Okay. What's a tank top at that time?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Just—you know—

STEVEN WATSON: Okay.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: —a low-cut—

STEVEN WATSON: Shirt—like a—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Yeah.

STEVEN WATSON: Like a—what we now call a T-shirt?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Yeah.

STEVEN WATSON: Okay. Okay.

Jumping back to the museum: So you talked about the Metropolitan. You don't talk about the Museum of Modern Art. Did you—was that a place that interested you? Of course, it wasn't free.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Hmm?

STEVEN WATSON: It wasn't free.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: No. Did it exist at that time?

STEVEN WATSON: It existed from 1929 on.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Oh, really?

STEVEN WATSON: Yeah.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: It wasn't on our walk up Fifth Avenue.

STEVEN WATSON: Although it's just a half a block off Fifth Avenue.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Oh, yeah. [Laughs.] Yeah.

STEVEN WATSON: But—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: No, we made that beeline straight to the museum.

STEVEN WATSON: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Would you spend time in the Egyptian rooms or the Greek rooms or the more historical places? Or it was mostly the paintings?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Oh, I'm sure we did. I'm sure we covered that museum from top to bottom. But I think what stands out most in my head were the paintings and the—and not even the sculptures so much. As a matter of fact, I don't remember being involved or interested in them at all at that point.

STEVEN WATSON: Okay.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I don't know. It seems like a—[inaudible]—to me.

STEVEN WATSON: And were art galleries of any—was that part of your world?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: No

STEVEN WATSON: No.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: No. I didn't even know about galleries at that time.

STEVEN WATSON: Well, there were galleries on 57th Street, and on Madison Avenue.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Oh, sure.

STEVEN WATSON: But that was not part of your world?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I didn't even know Madison Avenue existed until I was told to go and see Brodovitch on Madison Avenue. That was—that was another world. I don't know how I missed it; it was one block away.

STEVEN WATSON: [Laughs.]

LILLIAN BASSMAN: But I didn't know anything about that. And about magazines, we didn't have money for them. We had no interest in them. Paul and I went to a lot of movies. There was a movie house on 51st Street, I think—the Low East Lexington, that had a second balcony. And for a quarter, you could sit up there for hours and watch a double-header, you know.

At that particular time, I don't remember being interested in the theater or what went on in it; that happened later. And Paul and I spent a lifetime of walking in at mission—admission time—at intermission time—and standing in the back and seeing half a program. And if you went often enough, you might see the whole program, because at one point it would be reproduced again.

So we saw many dance recitals. For a quarter, you could go to the Philharmonic, give the usher a quarter, and you could get a seat up on the top balcony or so. Our culture—you know, I don't know at what time our cultural life, aside from the museum, took place; when it was that we started to go to the theater and see half a program. If you were lucky—[laughs]—you might see the whole program.

STEVEN WATSON: Was it called "second acting" at that time?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: No.

STEVEN WATSON: No. There was not a word for it?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: What was it called?

STEVEN WATSON: "Second acting."

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Never heard of it.

STEVEN WATSON: You go on at the second—after the intermission to the second act, and you get in free.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Get in free?

STEVEN WATSON: Yeah.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: We never got in free; we walked in free. [Laughs.]

STEVEN WATSON: [Laughs.]

LILLIAN BASSMAN: We were never allowed in free; we just did it.

STEVEN WATSON: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. When you saw movies, did you get ideas about clothes from movies, also? Or did that affect you?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Well, for the most part, I thought Hollywood movies—the look of it was ridiculous. I thought the Garbo movies were beautiful. I thought the fashion—I don't know at what point I became aware of the fact that I thought that Hollywood had no idea, whatsoever, about what good fashion was or—excuse me, or what made a woman attractive.

You know, Garbo was elegant; Dietrich was elegant. There were very few who were dressed with any kind of sensitivity. I mean, there was always too much: too many bows, too many flowers, too many gadgets—you know, didn't have the flow of a beautiful—I don't know. I'm sentimental about Garbo.

STEVEN WATSON: Yeah.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: She's my idea of the most beautiful woman in the world.

STEVEN WATSON: Well, it's interesting; the two beautiful women you mention are both European.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Really? [Laughs.]

STEVEN WATSON: Well, Marlene Dietrich, Greta Garbo—I mean, that may be just coincidence—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: It may.

STEVEN WATSON: —but maybe not. So you really didn't take much clothes learning, or fashion learning, from movies? It was really painting?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Oh, nothing from the movies; nothing at all—all from the museum. And, you know, some of the paintings are so meticulous, you can see the way the sleeve is brought into the seam, you know. Some of the paintings are like the greatest fashion drawings ever made.

STEVEN WATSON: Yeah.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: You could construct a whole outfit from the way they painted. And I was—what made me so aware of the fashion? I don't know whether it's something you are born with—

STEVEN WATSON: Did Sonny have that interest?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: No.

STEVEN WATSON: No.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Not at all.

STEVEN WATSON: And your mother, you said, was not so—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Not really.

STEVEN WATSON: Not really.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: No.

STEVEN WATSON: And—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: My father—I would never know what—where this came from. No one in my family showed that kind of interest.

STEVEN WATSON: Did you—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I think Paul did. Paul's mother was a seamstress and she made clothing for me. She understood what I wanted. I mean, she knew when to make a thing tight; she knew when to make it flared. She followed—she made wonderful Russian coats for me, you know, with that—a tight bodice and a big flared skirt. She knit clothing for me. She knit gloves for me that came up to my—

STEVEN WATSON: Above your elbows.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: But she was a seamstress. I mean, she was—she really knew—she knew clothing; she knew fitting. Where she got it from, I don't know, because she was—she worked in a factory.

STEVEN WATSON: A clothing factory, or—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Yeah.

STEVEN WATSON: Yeah.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: She was a total peasant; couldn't really read or write; could knit beautifully; could sew beautifully; could design; could paint—not paint, she did needle craft. If she had had more education, she could have had a good career, but she was a peasant, and no education. And everything she did was by instinct, I guess.

STEVEN WATSON: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LILLIAN BASSMAN: And it's how she was.

STEVEN WATSON: And she could appreciate your sense of style, which was—was unusual in that time.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Yeah.

STEVEN WATSON: Wearing jeans—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Well, I don't know if she—she was out to please me.

STEVEN WATSON: Okay.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Yeah, I think she had a native talent for fashion, for knitting. She made some extraordinary outfits for me.

STEVEN WATSON: So can you describe, like, one or two outfits that would be typical of you?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Of me?

STEVEN WATSON: Of what you liked.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Of what she made?

STEVEN WATSON: Yeah. I just—you know, it's hard for me to figure out how you describe an outfit, but—and we're talking probably in the '40s now—'30s or '40s.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Well, I don't think she had to do with my clothing at that point. I was, I guess, what you would describe as a hippie these days. I wore cheap jewelry, but—you know, things that you would pick up in a flea market, because we never had any money to buy anything—but things on a little black string around my neck or—I'm trying to think, where would I have gotten jewelry? I don't know. I had this, as I said, this one cape that was a hundred years old that I inherited from somebody, that I wore with very low-cut sort of peasant blouses and dangly earrings that I got—from where, I don't know.

But—and what I wanted most in those days was a pair of boots, that I couldn't afford. And I remember—I don't know how old I was at the time, but there's a picture of me somewhere. I couldn't afford the boots, so I had little jodhpurs, which were no—didn't take the place of boots.

But—I don't know; I'm trying to think. Where did I wear all this stuff? To the Seventh Avenue cafeteria in the Village, where all the artists collected and sat over a cup of coffee for four or five hours. Do you remember that cafeteria?

STEVEN WATSON: I don't. I don't.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: You don't? [Laughs.]

STEVEN WATSON: There was a famous cafeteria called Stewart's. Was—were you familiar with that? Okay.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I bet that was it—it was Stewart's. Maybe that was the name.

STEVEN WATSON: Maybe. I mean, it was certainly known as a place where people that didn't have a lot of money could—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Sit for hours and hours and hours, and talk and talk and talk on one cup of coffee. I think it must have been Stewart's—wasn't it, in the Village?

STEVEN WATSON: It could—yes. Yes. I bet it is.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: It must have been there.

STEVEN WATSON: I'm going to stop.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Okay. All right. You must be tired.

STEVEN WATSON: Well—I'm a little worried, you know, that I don't know exactly when—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Then I—

[END OF AUDIO TRACK AAA_bassma11_1126.]

STEVEN WATSON: This is October 12th. And this is October 12th, 2011. This is Steven Watson interviewing

Lillian Himmel in her home/studio. So—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Who's Lillian Himmel?

STEVEN WATSON: Oh, whoops. Oh, no. Oh, no. [They laugh.]

LILLIAN BASSMAN: That's all right.

STEVEN WATSON: I take this back. I take this back. It's Lillian Bassman, who was married to Paul Himmel. I'm—I apologize. The date is correct, though.

So we kind of left off—we were—we had been talking about your learning a lot by going to the Metropolitan Museum. You had aspirations of dancing. You were very interested in Isadora Duncan. So there comes a kind of crisis when you have an accident with your ankle. Can you say anything about that and how that affected your life?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Well, it destroyed everything I thought I was going to be. I thought I was going to be a dancer, and then that ended abruptly and permanently. So I had to find a new—it didn't stop my dancing, but it stopped—you know, made me realize that I—

STEVEN WATSON: That you couldn't be a professional dancer, probably?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Well, there was something called the red dance group. It was a left-wing organization or dance group. And I don't know how I was a member of that. I guess dancing wasn't—I mean, you didn't have to be a Martha Graham dancer. You just have to be—it was almost like acting. And I think I was part of that—I don't know for how long—but gradually I came to realize that dancing really was not in the cards for me, that I would have to find another way of expressing myself. From there, I don't remember where I went.

STEVEN WATSON: And at that time you were living with Paul?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I'm thinking I was older.

STEVEN WATSON: [Laughs.] I think you've said you started—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: It may have been a little earlier than that.

STEVEN WATSON: Okay. You have said you started living with Paul at 15.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Right, but I think this was a little earlier.

STEVEN WATSON: Oh, okay.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I'm confused about time, I guess. I know my sister and I were sort of involved in that. And maybe Paul was, too, but I didn't know him at the time. But that seemed to be kind of the left-wing way of expressing yourself at that time.

Is that on?

STEVEN WATSON: Yeah, I'm just—if you knock it over, we'll pick it up. But I just want to get it as close as I can.

And so Paul was going to school and getting a degree for teaching?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: No, I think he was just getting his degree for graduating. I don't think he had aspirations for teaching at the time. It was sort of college, you know, not directed at anything, you know, not directed at a profession or anything. It was getting a college degree. He was going to City College at the time.

STEVEN WATSON: And you could go to City College for very little money?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: For no money.

STEVEN WATSON: No money, okay.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: No money. You didn't pay tuition. You just had to have the average, I guess. I don't—I don't know. No money.

STEVEN WATSON: No money.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: And when I was 15, Paul and I were—well, when—at 15 I still lived on 13th Street with my

parents. And it was at the time when I was supposed to be going to school.

And my father didn't really like Paul. He didn't want me to have that close a relationship at that time. It had to do with family backgrounds and the fact that my mother and Paul's father were having sort of a—anyway, it was all mixed up. And I'm trying to think of how this happened. My father didn't want me to see Paul, and I used to sneak around, leave messages in buildings where there were little chunks out. And I would leave a message for him. He would leave a message for me—I don't know, little crevices.

Anyway, it was at some point that my father said—and I don't want to go into a long history of this, but my father said, "If you still are interested in him, if you're still having a relationship, Okay. It's lasted this long. It's all right." He was very understanding about that.

So Paul's family lived on 15th Street. We lived on 13th Street. He arranged it so that I could stay at his house a certain amount of time. He'd stay at my house a certain amount of time. At that point Paul had a one-room on 15th Street, in his family's apartment, and in that one room, there was bed, a piano bench, a piano. And that was it. And so I used to do my homework—when I stayed with Paul, do my homework on the piano bench. And you know, there was no room to move. You just went from the bed to the—I'm trying to think if why I told you this.

STEVEN WATSON: Well, we were talking about your being together at—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Right. At that point I was going to high school. And Paul was the kind—I can't believe it—he used to check up on my grades. Yeah, he used—he used to go to the school and look up on the board and—[they laugh]—and see how I did. Well, he was a born schoolteacher, you know. I had to study and—but he had a group of friends that were all sort of—now I would consider them semi-intellectuals. At that time, they thought they were very with it, into poetry, into, you know, the whole business. And I was this poor little stupid little high school girl who didn't know any of this business. Anyway—

STEVEN WATSON: Was his circle mostly boys?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: No.

STEVEN WATSON: No, it was—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Mostly girls. [Laughs.]

STEVEN WATSON: Okay.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I think there was—later on he had one chum, one classmate that he was very, very close to. But at that point I don't remember any boys, only girls. There was one girl who I remember particularly well who was lame. I don't know what was—I don't remember what was wrong with her legs. I'm trying to think of why I told you this.

STEVEN WATSON: Well, I asked if he was—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Yeah, I know. She was—she and her friends were very disdainful of me. You know, I was just that pretty little kid who was hanging around them. They had no use for it, I think were jealous of—I didn't have their social background with them. I was a newcomer, you know, and not very prepossessing you know, just—you know, someone who they thought Paul was just attracted to because I was good-looking, sexy, all the things they were not. They were very intellectual. That was not a very happy period for me, that group. They—you know, not being accepted by them was—[inaudible]. But—

STEVEN WATSON: But Paul was always very supportive of you?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Oh, yeah.

STEVEN WATSON: I mean, that strikes me.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Always. In—I think he thought that I was bright, I was interesting, I was on a developmental, creative, artistic level with him. He didn't care that his friends were not accepting of me. It didn't bother him. He had me. And I was, you know, 100 percent enthralled, so it didn't—it didn't bother him.

And at that time, when we were sharing that place, I started to go to high school. He had had me transfer from the Bronx high school that I went to on Van der Charles, which was a so-called intellectual, whatever, high school, you know, where grades were important. And living downtown and being sort of in the neighborhood of 15th Street and Bridges I went to Textile High School, which was on 18th Street. I guess the thought was that in some ways, I would become involved in the Textile High School kind of curriculum, but it didn't turn out that

way. I—

STEVEN WATSON: What—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I haven't—go ahead.

STEVEN WATSON: I was going to say, was there an art component to the technical school?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Supposedly, but not really. [Laughs.] I remember one teacher that I—I mean, they were—they were so out of touch with the way the world was going that—I remember having a fight with one teacher that said you couldn't use blue and green in the same picture. And I said, "But blue and green exist in nature."

STEVEN WATSON: [Laughs.]

LILLIAN BASSMAN: It was—it was a ridiculous school. But there were two teachers there that had—that were teaching for their first year, and they were very enthusiastic about being teachers and so on, even though it was Textile High School.

And so I sort of threw out my knowledge of the literature that I was reading, you know, the—my association with Paul that was getting me into more advanced things than they were having at the school. And so I quickly began to pull the wool over everybody's eyes. I didn't know grammar, you know, all the things that I had missed, all the teaching. And so when I had to write a piece, I would do it in free-flowing style. Who was I imitating? You tell me. And I got away with it. I think they thought that I had more culture than I actually had, but compared to what the other students had at Textile High School that they knew nothing, I was a genius. Had to be.

It was a good couple of years. I got—I got away with all kinds of—no knowledge. I didn't know grammar. I didn't know spelling. I got all A's. I got all—you know, all the accolades. And this sort of spoiled me, because I know that years later, when I really wanted to study and I went to—what was it, Columbia?

STEVEN WATSON: Columbia?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I'm trying to think of whether it was Columbia or City—anyway, I realized then that I knew nothing about spelling. I knew nothing about punctuation. I had zip kind of education. And yet I got away with all kinds of things, I think, because of Paul and the milieu that we were in. I read a lot. I talked to a lot of people. I was educated beyond what anybody in Textile High School had. I would say that in a way, it was very detrimental because when I really wanted to study, I realized that I couldn't read fast enough. I couldn't—I still read every word, and I think to this day I still read the a's, the the's because I'm never—I always said I was going to take a class in speed reading. I never did. And it became a big problem when I really wanted to study. But then I was on to other things anyway.

STEVEN WATSON: Do you think you learned much about textiles when you were in that school?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: No, I didn't take any of the technical classes that had to do with the textile business. And the drawing was ridiculous. When you couldn't put blue and green in the same painting or drawing, what could you expect, you know? But aside from the school, I always had other ways of learning.

STEVEN WATSON: Now, we've talked mostly about Paul's desire to move you forward. Did you—did you feel much from your parents in that way, in terms of learning a trade or learning—no?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: No, I left my parents long before that. I was 15. Paul and me—

STEVEN WATSON: So Paul is your boyfriend and also kind of a parent in some—in almost—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Yeah, my teacher, my lover, you know. He brought me up.

STEVEN WATSON: So how did you get to Pratt? I mean, isn't that one of the next big changes, that you begin going to Pratt?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: How did I get into Pratt? What was I doing before I got into Pratt?

STEVEN WATSON: Was that also one of Paul's ideas, going to Pratt?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I don't think so.

STEVEN WATSON: Okay.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I don't know where I was before I went to Pratt, but I was drawing. I remember I—at Pratt, I

took a class in speed drawing, speed—

STEVEN WATSON: Drawing?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Sketching. And those are the sketches that I brought to Brodovitch. Now, how I got to Brodovitch is another story. I—

STEVEN WATSON: Well, we'll do that story. But I want to know, did you have models in this class, in the speed-sketching class? Were still lifes—how did—how did that work?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: No. You know, I don't remember the class. I don't remember whether they were fashion models or what kind of—funny, I can't remember any of that. I can't visualize the class. I know that I was sort of starving at the time. In order to stay downtown and go to Pratt, Paul and I were living at the Bronx for one year at that time. And in order to stay downtown and go to school, the only money I had was for hot chocolate at night.

And yet I remember being very excited about those drawings that I was making, because I obviously thought enough of them so that when I had the opportunity to meet Brodovitch—and I don't know how—I had these drawings, which he thought were very exciting. But I knew nothing about fashion, nothing about drawing. And it was then that he offered me a scholarship. Well, no, he said, "Why don't you come to my class at"—and I don't know—you know, I don't know how I'd gotten to Brodovitch, but that's another—different—but he said, "I have this class at the New School." And I said, "Very nice, but I have no money to go to the New School." And he said, "Well, I'll tell you what: I'll give you a partial scholarship. You work for"—this only lasted, I think, a couple of weeks—"You work for the New School." Okay. At the end of a couple weeks he said, "I'll give you a scholarship to my class. In this room we do fashion illustration. In this room we do posters." You know, and this went on. And so I—

STEVEN WATSON: But I'd like to know more, you know. So there was a certain part about posters, a certain part about fashion drawing?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Right.

STEVEN WATSON: Was there anything about layout, design?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Well, that came later.

STEVEN WATSON: That came later. Okay.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Okay. So I went into his class—this is still on scholarship, sort of—well, scholarship—it means that I didn't have to pay. He had his class divided into two rooms. In one room, I did fashion illustration, all to do with fashion. In the other room I had to do with posters and, you know, visual art. I went into the fashion room, and I did maybe one or two drawings. And he poked me on the shoulder, and he said, "In the other room, we do posters and layout. Would you like to go in there and see what it's like?" I don't know why he said this to me. I thought I was doing fairly well—[laughs]—at the illustration, but he noticed something about it. And I said "Okay." I went into the other room and never left it. I never went back to the fashion illustration. I never really went back to fashion at that point. In this other room, we did posters. We would—we learned about all of the greats, all the—you know, the French poster designers and the Russian designers and all that.

STEVEN WATSON: Now, you know, would that be the people we would think of as the Russian avant-garde and—now and—you know, Rodchenko and—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Oh, yeah.

STEVEN WATSON: So there was definitely an—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Right.

STEVEN WATSON: —influence from—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Oh, yeah.

STEVEN WATSON: —from that. And what we—you know, say, constructivists—I don't want to put words in your mouth.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: No, I'm trying to think of what it's like. Brodovitch never instructed you in any way. I don't know whether he—he must have—in that class, I remember you were thrown into—to making posters. And I remember early on doing—I'm trying to think of how to describe it, but I'll get back to it later. I know that he

criticized what I was doing at that point as being too influenced by previous work and not experimenting enough.

STEVEN WATSON: Would he show you experimental design, you think?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I don't remember Brodovitch ever instructing in any way. It's always—life with Brodovitch was criticism. I don't think he ever led me by the nose in any direction. How I came to these—but Brodovitch was a very strange teacher. The only thing he ever said that I can remember in the way of teaching is why to have ham and eggs every day. In other words, be creative. Think of other ways of saying anything you wanted to say. He was a man of very few words. How he taught, I guess, was like allowing general criticism in the class. Like, you put all your drawings on the table, and nobody knew whose was which.

I remember once having something I had done ripped to shreds, I think by Brodovitch himself, and my going home and crying: "Oh, no, no—I'll never make it." The next morning I said, "Yes, I will." I was always very resilient in that way. I always came back fighting.

STEVEN WATSON: I'm guessing that Brodovitch could be very forbidding.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: [Laughs.] Yeah.

STEVEN WATSON: Yes?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Yes. He could.

STEVEN WATSON: How would you say—you know, in terms of comparing yourself with the other students, how well were you able to stand up to him?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: In class, I don't remember. I honestly don't remember any of that. I know that at the end of the class, the plum of the season, you know—who—was the best student became his apprentice at *Harper's Bazaar*, and that was me. So though I don't remember too much about that—those sessions—you know, where I stood, I obviously made out fairly well, because I was chosen to become his apprentice at *Harper's Bazaar*.

STEVEN WATSON: And this is out of a class of about how many students?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I think 25.

STEVEN WATSON: 25, okay.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I think.

STEVEN WATSON: So Lillian, you know, I know this is a hard one, but I think it's very important. Why did he choose you? This is not random. He's not a random man.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: No. I would imagine he liked the work that I produced in that class, even though there were many ups and downs. But in the long run I must have produced the most promising to him, because certainly I was not, of our class, a girl that he was interested in. He liked pretty, Presbyterian-type girls. I don't think he much appreciated my being more interested in Paul than in his kind of social milieu. Though he never voiced it and never, ever referred to it, I'm sure that he felt that I was a class outside his social class.

STEVEN WATSON: That in itself says something about him, that he would choose you. Do you think he recognized the interest in art that you and Paul had, going to the museum all of the time. Was that—because I suspect that wasn't so typical.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I don't think he ever—if he paid attention to it, he never voiced. And even—I think he sort of took it for granted that I had enough culture to warrant his taking me on as his assistant.

STEVEN WATSON: And that work as an assistant, was that just a summer thing which moved into something?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Well, it was a summer—not apprenticeship, but a summer—I—

STEVEN WATSON: You know, or practice—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Well, he always had students who stayed with him for two weeks, for a month or so. I was there—I don't know how long I was there when I decided—I guess I was there for the month of Paul's summer vacation or something, and I decided it was time for me to move on and try to get a job in Manhattan. I apprenticed with him for a summer, but you know, it came—I realized that I had to start making a living again.

So then I went to work for Elizabeth Arden as a—I'm trying to think of what you would call it—not an apprentice, but a—sort of an assistant to the art director there at the time. And I was—I don't know how long I had been working there, but I'd get a call from Brodovitch: "Why don't you come back to *Harper's Bazaar*?" And I said, "I'd love to work for *Harper's Bazaar*, Mr. Brodovich," you know, "but I have to make a living." This went on for months, I guess. At least every week he would call up and say, "Why not come back to *Harper's Bazaar*?" Again I would say, "But I have to make a living." Finally—what is a living?

STEVEN WATSON: So finally—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Finally he called up and said, "All right, I've gotten you a salary. You can come back to *Harper's*," he said. What's a salary—[inaudible]—I don't remember. It couldn't have been very much, but enough to bring me back to the *Bazaar*. And then I start to work for him full-time. I was his full assistant. And I got paid. How much I got paid, I don't even remember, but I did get paid. And I was—on that basis, I was his first paid assistant. Up until then he just had—you know.

STEVEN WATSON: Do you think it would have been kind of like wealthier girls that didn't need money, and it was just a compliment to be working with him? I'm just trying to understand how this works.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I guess—I'm trying to think—they weren't really wealthy girls, but they weren't thinking the way I thought. I thought I had to make a living. They didn't feel—I guess they didn't feel—you know, maybe they came from middle-class families or—well, I remember one girl named Jackie Henry [ph] who was the daughter of a Russian general. And they weren't rich, but they weren't—they weren't poor the way we—or they didn't think the way we thought, that we had to make a living, that we had to support ourselves.

STEVEN WATSON: Was it always girls, or were there boys that worked with him?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Up until that point there were only girls. Later on there were only boys. Brodovitch had a very disturbed home life, and he had a very disturbed son. And I think as the boy got older and I got more to being like an art director and not dependent on him emotionally that he got involved with all the boys that later became his sidekicks—[inaudible].

I don't know how to explain my relationship to Brodovitch. He did me in on a number of occasions, and yet I maintained this sort of business relationship with him, or you know, we worked side—not side by side, but I worked in front of him, the other position. I put up with a lot of nasty situations that took place with him, and yet I had a tremendous respect for him as an art director. And we worked exceedingly well together in spite of the fact that he did some nasty things.

I remember once we were asked to do a poster with the—don't talk, don't something or other, during the war, and he asked me to work on the poster with him. And I said, "Fine." And so I took a picture or—took a picture of the two of us lying there like dead soldiers, dead on the ground, and then I made a poster of it. And Brodovitch—and I'm—oh, I don't remember—Brodovitch said—did something to the lettering that—say it was an A and a B—they could've been closer together. And then the poster was done. Paul and I had taken the photograph. I did the layout. The thing went to the Museum of Modern Art signed "Alexey Brodovitch." Not a word about my—and not even "Alexey Brodovitch and Lillian Bassman," giving me some credit. I just went under Alexey Brodovitch's name and his contribution. And I've—I'm not exaggerating—it was that the two letters in the first word were maybe a hair closer than they should have been.

But that was Alexey, who took all the credit, never gave me a little credit for having done this poster. And yet I knew that my survival as an art director meant that I didn't make much of this. I never said a word to him; he never said a word to me. Paul was appalled. But I was very concerned and very happy—when working on the *Bazaar* and, in a way, working very successfully with him. In spite of his malevolent acts, and there were many, he's Brodovitch.

STEVEN WATSON: Now of course I'm curious about what some of the other malevolent acts are.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I'll have to think about that.

STEVEN WATSON: What?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I'll have to think about that.

STEVEN WATSON: Okay.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: All right. I'll come back.

STEVEN WATSON: Ah, because you know, I don't know how much of it is the art director always just takes credit for everything. When I talked to the assistant to Warhol, you know, he would say—Warhol would say, "Well, why

don't you—let's do a Christmas thing." And then the assistant would say, "Oh, well, how about a Santa Claus coming out of the chimney?" He said: "Oh, okay. Why don't you sketch it up?" And ultimately, it would always be considered a Warhol work. And the assistant kind of felt, well, that was just—that was just the nature of the business. But you're describing something where you're really doing everything, at least in the case of the poster.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Oh, yeah. I'm not dreaming.

STEVEN WATSON: No, no, I know. I know. Would you be at editorial meetings with him?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: No.

STEVEN WATSON: No.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: He was never—I don't remember him ever going to editorial meetings. He was never—we were the recipients of the fashion shoots, the articles, the photographic articles, the theater pages and everything, but we never—and he certainly was never in on any of the meetings. It was material that came to us at our desk, and we dealt with it. If it—if it meant assigning photographers, we did—you know, to the project.

STEVEN WATSON: The art directors would assign photographers? Okay.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Yeah, right. But aside from that, Brodovitch and I were never called to these meetings. We were brought theater pieces, and we were brought articles, and we were brought—all that material would land on our desk, but we had no input on what it was.

STEVEN WATSON: So it would be primarily you and Brodovitch that would assign photos? Or—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: It was Brodovitch. I never assigned—

STEVEN WATSON: Okay. Now, I'm going to say a few of the photographers that did a lot of work with *Harper's Bazaar*, and I, you know, would love any—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: All right.

STEVEN WATSON: Okay, so one is Louise Dahl-Wolfe.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: [Laughs.]

STEVEN WATSON: And—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: My archenemy. All right.

STEVEN WATSON: Okay. So should we start with somebody else?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: No, start with her.

STEVEN WATSON: Okay. So what was she like? Do you think—you know, I want to know if you thought she was ever good and became stale.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Oh, yeah.

STEVEN WATSON: So yeah, just tell the whole—anything.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: What I thought about Louise?

STEVEN WATSON: Yeah.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: She started out as a fresh young eye to fashion. She had a great sense of fashion. She ended up in a box. She ended up in the studio. Maybe it was convenient. Maybe it was pleasant. You had all the assistants. I know from assistants of hers that she would spend the day sort of sitting around. All the models, everybody would be sitting around waiting for her to pull herself together, to have lunch, to feel like she wanted to work. And then everything became sort of very cut and dry. She was a great colorist. She had—she spent a lot of time, I think, conceiving her colored backgrounds and stuff. But she became very stale.

STEVEN WATSON: And—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: And I became very openly antagonistic to her kind of work.

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STEVEN WATSON: How would you express that? Would you express it to her or to Brodovitch?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I guess I'd express it to her, to her assistants.

STEVEN WATSON: Okay.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I don't know how it became extremely well-known of a magazine that I also worked with, old-fashioned, out of—out of step with the times, and not at all interesting. It became very—I guess I wasn't very subtle about how I felt about her work. And I guess it got back there. Anyway, she hated me with a passion, as she well should have because I did everything I could do, to encourage the magazine to use the young photographers, to gather them, you know—[inaudible]—

STEVEN WATSON: Okay. Before we go to the young ones—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: All right. I'm sorry.

STEVEN WATSON: I want to just, you know—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I got you off the track.

STEVEN WATSON: No, it's fine, it's fine. I'm intrepid. So, if we talk about—Hoyningen-Huene

LILLIAN BASSMAN: There's very little to say about that because by the time I got to the art department, Huene was long gone. He was in Hollywood doing color and whatever.

STEVEN WATSON: Okay.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: He was no more a part of the Bazaar.

STEVEN WATSON: Okay. What about—now, and I want to make sure I pronounce this right—Martin Munkácsi?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Unfortunately—and I was a great admirer of his work—I never met him and never interacted with him. Maybe it was a language thing, but Brodovitch worked directly with him and never through me.

STEVEN WATSON: Okay, okay. Herman Landshoff?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Yeah. [Laughs.]

STEVEN WATSON: Why do you laugh?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Such a character.

STEVEN WATSON: Yeah?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: He was so German. On my god, how could you be so German? Landshoff was the kind, when I was sitting with models in the winter, because he was cold or whatever, he would take off all his shirt and everything and be bare breasted so that they should know that they didn't have to feel cold, because here we was: the hero, undressed.

Anyway, he was—again, Landshoff was someone who worked almost directly with Brodovitch. I mean, he would be given an assignment and bring it into Brodovitch and not really have to do with me. I would just have to do with his photographs and his work, but he dealt directly with Brodovitch. He was—he was a very—Brodovitch had a lot of respect for him. He was a very creative character. We used him a lot on *Junior Bazaar* once I got started there, but he wasn't anyone that I could personally interact with—at least not till later, you know, when I took over *Junior Bazaar*. Anyway—

STEVEN WATSON: Did you feel that was a male-female thing in any way or more—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: European, German to Russian to—you know.

STEVEN WATSON: Okay.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: More Europe than America.

STEVEN WATSON: Got it.

How would you—for example, with him, how would you describe what his style was in terms of fashion photography?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Well, it would depend on—funny, I don't remember what he did for *Harper's Bazaar*. I know that for *Junior Bazaar* he had a great sense of the kind of journalistic approach at that time. I don't know how—I don't know how to describe it exactly.

STEVEN WATSON: So it might be—it would be more in the real world than in the studio?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Oh, never in the studio.

STEVEN WATSON: Okay, okay.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: He was always on location, and very inventive in technique at certain periods, which made for a kind of new photography at that point, an ability to—funny, how it changed from a kind of static, German style to a very moving, physical style, and very inventive in the way he did it.

STEVEN WATSON: Was—you know, I'm taking him as an example but we can talk about the others—was lighting a very carefully controlled thing?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: No, because he photographed outdoors all the time.

STEVEN WATSON: Okay.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: So I don't know how much attention he paid to physical light outside, but it was always—as I remember, always on location.

STEVEN WATSON: Yeah, okay.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I don't remember his ever being in the studio.

STEVEN WATSON: Was Louise Dahl-Wolfe often, even early, in the studio or did that come later?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Well, that's when I felt that her change to a boring photographer took place, is when she left the outdoors where she was kind of—kind of marvelous at making use of her surroundings and her ability to make a model part of that. When she moved into the studio I felt she lost her—all of her emotional controls and became very static and heavy.

STEVEN WATSON: Now, at this time, we're talking—I think we're talking '46, '47, '48? We can get the dates exact later. The editor, was that Carmel Snow?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

STEVEN WATSON: Now of course I want to know as much as you can tell me about Carmel Snow. I know you're bored about being asked.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: No—[inaudible]. Got a long—sort of—funny kind of relationship with her—very close, very not part of her social being. I wasn't a good Catholic girl. I didn't—I didn't appreciate any of her personal life in that—in that way, but as far as an editor was concerned I thought she was brilliant. I had complete faith in her tastes. I admired her willing to fight the bazaar administration for what she believed in.

In general, I thought she was the perfect editor. She allowed those people who she trusted to take over completely. I mean, her assistant at that time was Frances MacFadden, who was a brilliant editor. She was my ideal of a strong woman who had her own opinions, could tolerate other people's opinions, could allow them to grow. To me, she was the epitome of the most creative editor of that kind of a magazine, which was not simply a fashion magazine. At that time it had the best literature and the best photographs, the best—the best of everything.

And she steerheaded [ph]—is that the word you use—

STEVEN WATSON: Spearheaded, yeah.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: —it all with an iron hand but gloves.

STEVEN WATSON: That's a beautiful way of putting it.

So now, for example, it would cover—*Harper's Bazaar* would cover theater, would cover, society events—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Literature.

STEVEN WATSON: Literature.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Theater, dance, photography, the opera.

STEVEN WATSON: Film? Movies, film?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Oh yeah.

STEVEN WATSON: Oh yeah, okay. okay.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Well, movies, theater went under—movies went under theater. That was the editor who ran that—ran that.

STEVEN WATSON: Okay, okay.

So it—Carmel Snow got editors for these various areas.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Yeah.

STEVEN WATSON: And then gave them—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: The final word.

STEVEN WATSON: And then, what?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Was the final word.

STEVEN WATSON: Yeah, yeah. But gave them a lot of—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Oh, god, yeah. Yeah, I mean—I mean how learned was she? What did she appreciate about Truman Capote? But she trusted her editors. I don't know how much she read of Truman's, but—and I'm sure that being a good editor herself she probably eventually read it. But, I mean, she gave over to her editors. She trusted them.

STEVEN WATSON: Do you remember who some of those editors were?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I can see them all, but do I remember their name? That's another thing.

STEVEN WATSON: Well, and, you know, Lillian, as I said, we can put in the names later.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Yeah. Right.

STEVEN WATSON: But if you just give a clue like a literary editor was—however you want to do it. I just think your impressions are important.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Well, I can see all these women and I can't think of their names. The name I remember is Dorothy Wheelock who had to do with movie and theater.

STEVEN WATSON: Dorothy Miller or—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Wheelock.

STEVEN WATSON: Wheeler, okay.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Wheelock.

STEVEN WATSON: Okay, okay.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: But there were so many more important people than Dorothy, except that I think Dorothy went on to other magazines later that I sort of—and ran into her, you know. If you ask me tomorrow I might remember the—

STEVEN WATSON: Okay. Let's do this, next time I see you—and we're not ending yet—but next time I see if you if you can make any notes of names.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Of the names?

STEVEN WATSON: Yeah. And, you know, just somehow—but I think it's very important to talk about, you know, who these people that ran this important fashion and photo magazine—what that was.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Well, of course, there was Mrs. Vreeland who ran the fashion.

STEVEN WATSON: Oh!

LILLIAN BASSMAN: How could you forget Mrs. Vreeland?

STEVEN WATSON: I could never—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: The most important woman in the world.

STEVEN WATSON: Well—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Oh, god.

STEVEN WATSON: Was—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I used to sit in the—my office, my seat in the office was sort of next to her office. And I would hear her on the telephone—the most colorful language you've ever heard. Fluent—she was—it was like going to the best theater every day listening to her talk.

STEVEN WATSON: And was she a woman of very strong opinions at that time?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Mrs. Vreeland?

STEVEN WATSON: Mrs. Vreeland [laughs].

LILLIAN BASSMAN: "My dear," she would walk in with her long nails—oh yeah. She knew the best photographs, the best artists. She knew everybody, everything. She knew the painters. I think everybody took her as sort of frivolous and just sort of fashion-minded. She knew about art, she knew about theater, she—I don't know. You'd have to do a whole—a whole issue—whole talk on just Vreeland.

STEVEN WATSON: Oh just—uh-huh [affirmative].

LILLIAN BASSMAN: You must know about Mrs. Vreeland. You must have read all the books about her. You must have seen the movies about her.

STEVEN WATSON: Well, you—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: It was pure theater every time she came into talk about a sitting—you know, photographs that she was bringing in, you know.

STEVEN WATSON: So would you work in a very direct way with her or you would just hear her?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Well, at that point I would just hear her. When I became a photographer I worked very directly with her, so—whether my vision of her is colored by the years I don't know. At the time, she was, I think, someone who was way beyond me. She direct—worked directly with Brodovitch. It was, like—where was I? I was some little—the only time she paid attention to me at that time was when I came to work one day with long green knee socks on, and she was intrigued. "Where did you get them? Where did you get the idea?" you know, like it was the most brilliant thing that ever happened that I made dark green knee socks.

STEVEN WATSON: [Laughs.]

LILLIAN BASSMAN: But at that—at that point, I didn't exist. You know, it was directly over my head to Brodovitch. You know, I was just sitting there at that desk, you know.

STEVEN WATSON: So maybe we shift to *Junior Bazaar*. Do you think we've—are there many things we've missed?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: No.

STEVEN WATSON: Okay. So—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Except my relationship to Brodovitch in *Junior Bazaar*. [Laughs.]

STEVEN WATSON: How did this happen, the *Junior Bazaar*?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Well, it was at a time when I guess there was a market, but not a market, for a young magazine. *Junior Bazaar* had been part of *Harper's Bazaar* for a long time. I guess the businesspeople decided it was time for a *Junior Bazaar*. And Mrs. Snow came to me and said, "I'd like to make this magazine for young people called *Junior Bazaar*. Would you design it?" And I—you know, "I would love to," you know, "Great."

So I started to make layouts, try to decide on sizes and everything. And Brodovitch said, "What are you doing over there?" And I said, "Well, Mrs. Snow asked me to design a"—what do you call it—"a dummy for a magazine that they were going to call *Junior Bazaar*." Before I knew it, he stormed into Mrs. Snow's office and said, "What do you mean, you're producing a new magazine, and you didn't give it to me to do?" And she didn't know what to do about it, but she had already asked me to make it. So she said, "Well, what do you say if you and Brodovitch, you know, design this magazine together?"

And the implication was that if I didn't allow Brodovitch to share in this, she didn't know what she would do if Brodovitch quit, because he threatened that unless—and I—"But I understand that you can't allow Brodovitch to go. Let's make a compromise and see how he'll live with it if the two of us work together and create *Junior Bazaar* together." I don't know what went on in his head and how long it took him to make peace with this idea, but he did finally agree that we should both be involved in making *Junior Bazaar* a new magazine.

STEVEN WATSON: Now, this is 1948—no, not '48, '47—no, '46.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Don't ask me about dates.

STEVEN WATSON: So it—yeah, well, it—I—as far as I can see here, *Junior Bazaar* started in the spring of '46. It might have even been—no, I'm wrong. December of '45 there's something. So it's—were you surprised that Mrs. Snow directly approached you?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: About *Junior Bazaar*?

STEVEN WATSON: Yeah.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: No.

STEVEN WATSON: No?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I'm trying to think. I don't know. Brodovitch had had so many accidents and so many problems with her. At one point I had run *Harper's Bazaar* on my own. I know that there were times when I did, when—I don't know the exact sequence of events. At one point he—and I don't know if this was before *Junior Bazaar*—he was run down by a Hearst truck. [Laughs.] Isn't that priceless? Anyway, he was. And as a result, I ran the *Bazaar*. He was out a good deal of the time. I would do the issue of the—of the magazine. And you know, they would—they would—[inaudible]—well, some of this, some of that, that had to go. And I would bring the layouts to him, and we would go over them, and then I'd go back to the office and produce them.

And I don't—this must have all been long before *Junior Bazaar*. But I remember there were many, many months when I would do the layouts, bring them out to the farm where we were, we'd go over them, make changes or suggestions and bring them back and produce them. But I think there were many occasions when he would be out for a period of time and I would take over. So I had experience. I had production experience. I made a major change in how the production department functioned. I was thoroughly aware of how a magazine worked, how you check the dye trains—not the dye trains—the proofs from the printing. So I had a thorough, thorough background because there were many long stretches when Brodovitch wasn't there and I carried—

STEVEN WATSON: Carried it on. I mean—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I mean, he was still the art director, but physically I knew a lot about the making of the magazine, how it functioned, you know, the color train, kind of the proofs and stuff like that.

STEVEN WATSON: It strikes me that this would be incredibly good, what can I say, learning period for you to do it on your own, and then get feedback.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Right, then get to *Junior Bazaar*.

STEVEN WATSON: And then get to do it on your own.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Right.

STEVEN WATSON: This is a perfect three-step—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Right.

STEVEN WATSON: How was Brodovitch about responding to things that you brought in on your own?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: At *Junior Bazaar*?

STEVEN WATSON: No, I mean during the periods he was out. I mean, that's a general question, but—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I don't know. Brodovitch accepted everything as his doing. I was the perfect assistant. I don't think he ever recognized how much of the technical stuff I took over. I don't know how much he actually did of the technical things. I mean, he—aside from correcting the color proofs, I don't think he involved himself in the physical work of the art department.

STEVEN WATSON: So Carmel Snow was fully aware of what you were capable of?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Yes.

STEVEN WATSON: And I'm just the checking time. We have about 15 more minutes.

So you began bringing in a younger generation of photographers, and that was both a decision of—on your part or Carmel Snow's, or how did that work?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Well, I think to some extent, I guess in a peripheral, you know, way, Brodovitch was aware of these young photographers that I would bring in. And I think that he may have had something to do with the acceptance of them. It doesn't seem possible to me that I helped develop all these young people on my own. I must have consulted him in some way. I think that many of them may have studied with Brodovitch, been part of that group.

STEVEN WATSON: Okay. Well, let's focus on Paul for a second here. Is this around the time that he begins taking up the camera?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Yeah. Paul had—at the time that I took on the apprenticeship with Brodovitch, he took on an apprenticeship at *Vogue* and from there went on to Plucer studio as a photographer, as part of the Plucer studio where we paid—

STEVEN WATSON: Say that word again?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Plucer.

STEVEN WATSON: Prucer? P-R—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: P-L-U-C-E-R.

STEVEN WATSON: Okay. What is that?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: He was a photographer who had a studio at 480—in—you know, in the building that *Vogue* was in and all those. He was a fashion photographer, and he was an extremely successful commercial photographer. And I guess magazine photography not—not for the *Bazaar*. But he was a well-known professional at that time. And Paul worked in his studio in the same way that I later worked for Radcliffe on a—on a commercial basis. We—they got a percentage of everything we did, and they—I guess they supplied an assistant. Anyway—

STEVEN WATSON: What would Paul have done at the Plucer studio?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: He had been a photographer.

STEVEN WATSON: What?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: He'd been a freelance photographer.

STEVEN WATSON: Okay, so he was photographing?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Yeah.

STEVEN WATSON: It wasn't like he was developing or—okay.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: No, he was not part of Plucer's staff. He was part of the studio. But—

STEVEN WATSON: And how did Paul learn?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: How did Paul learn?

STEVEN WATSON: Yeah.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: He was always an amateur photographer, didn't know where it'd go. How did he learn, then? He did a lot of freelance work with a lot of small magazines. When I was editor of *Junior Bazaar*, not I but the editorial group used him with a number of assignments. At that point he'd—he never worked for the *Bazaar*. I don't really remember really what he was doing as—for a living, except he obviously made enough money. And I don't remember ever supporting him, so he—

STEVEN WATSON: And was Paul interested in fashion?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: No.

STEVEN WATSON: No.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I think for him—I mean, he was interested in fashion the way we were interested in fashion when we went to the museum, but not in fashion photography, though he did a lot of it. But you know, I think for him it was a way of making money. He never really sold his soul to it the way I did.

STEVEN WATSON: Got it. I'm going to stop for today.

[END OF AUDIO TRACK AAA_bassma11_1128.]

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Where? When?

STEVEN WATSON: Well, first of all, starting with *Junior Bazaar*.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: *Junior Bazaar*? Okay.

STEVEN WATSON: You know, I just—I brought this book, which I like very much, and I think of instead of saying to you in an abstract way, you know, how did you do things—that you look at a few of these. And I'm very interested—now, we're talking about design—how it was different than Alexander Lieberman. You know, I was talking to a friend, Mary Panzer, and she said *Harper's Bazaar* was totally different.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Right.

STEVEN WATSON: Totally different. So this is—in terms of looking at this photograph and design, something about how you did it, about layering, about production. You know, now we do it all on computers, but it's totally different then. So I just, you know, marked a few of these. And anyway—okay, first of all, this is Lillian Bassman, and it's October—what is it? October—Steve, what is the date?

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: 20th.

STEVEN WATSON: This is Lillian Bassman, October 20th in her studio and home.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Okay. So now you want me to talk about production?

STEVEN WATSON: I want to talk—you to talk about, you know, production, the idea, this particular one. And you know, I see breasts—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Pardon me?

STEVEN WATSON: [Laughs.]

LILLIAN BASSMAN: What?

STEVEN WATSON: This looks like breasts. I don't know if you had any idea of that.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Oh. [Laughs.] No. No, that's your interpretation—

STEVEN WATSON: Okay.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: —completely not mine.

STEVEN WATSON: Okay.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: You know, it's almost impossible for me to go back to when I was that young and doing *Junior Bazaar*. I know that we were all out for a new way of selling an item, of projecting a vision of how to produce a page that would convey to the reader the idea of sun lamps taking over. It's a little abstract, but I think it very visually tells you what the lamps do to the figure. And so we experimented, and we were designers. And so this seemed to me at the time to be the logical way of explaining what sun lamps do to the body. That's this picture.

STEVEN WATSON: Okay, and I'm just going to say we are talking about *Junior Bazaar*, March 1946. This next one is December 1945.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: You know, it's almost impossible for me to recreate the mood in my head at the time, but this had to do with, what, decoration for Christmas, for dancing, for movement, for the excitement of the movement of the red stripes or whatever you call them, the stars. They had to do with the time of the month or the month of that year. Okay—all right—[inaudible]—

STEVEN WATSON: But—so you had no trouble using photographs as elements and using graphic things and decoration?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Well, I think that was essentially—the idea was to give the fashion and the movement, the excitement of that particular month. And I think the fashion is there, but the excitement of the movement is created by the abstract plums—or they're not so abstract, but the decorative plums, okay?

STEVEN WATSON: Okay, this is a photo by Paul Himmel. And it's extremely interesting. I'd like you to say whatever you want to.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I just like that it's a beautiful photograph of a young woman without being literal, creating the mood of a girl washing or whatever she's doing behind glass, and abstract enough to give the whole photograph a new look, a more photographic interpretation of what the girl is doing.

STEVEN WATSON: And we're looking at *Junior Bazaar*, July 1947. And this was not retouched.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Oh, no.

STEVEN WATSON: It was just the glass.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Not retouched at all.

STEVEN WATSON: So was this totally Paul's idea?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I think so. You know, at *Junior Bazaar*, we gave our photographers full reign to interpret their ideas, recognizing what *Junior Bazaar* stood for and the freedom to stay away from literal photography into the more poetic side.

STEVEN WATSON: Oh, I love that. You know, anything more you want to say about that, great.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: No, that's enough.

STEVEN WATSON: And both you and Paul worked in a range between literal and abstract. Do you think that's—I'm—I don't want to put words in your mouth.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Abstract, I don't know. Emotional, away from the hard-edged photograph into a more simple mood.

STEVEN WATSON: So now we're looking at *Junior Bazaar*, 1946 March. And I'm here interested in your design in terms of the angles, the very graphic things mixed with photographs.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I don't know. They don't strike me as being very exciting.

STEVEN WATSON: [Laughs.]

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I think the upper right-hand page with the tools are more interesting. Oh, it's called "New Angles." That's pretty literal. [They laugh.] I don't know. This page doesn't excite me very much. The upper hand, the page of the red cross—it's been done. I don't know we did it. I don't find any of this page very exciting.

STEVEN WATSON: So here is a fairly early photograph by Richard Avedon. You don't have to talk specifically about this, but I'm very interested in anything you want to say about early Avedon, both the way he approached photographs—and of course you knew him, and you knew him quite well.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I knew him. I had a lot of respect for his photographic eye. I don't find this picture very telling of who Dick was or how he photographed. I don't know why this picture is in here. It's not an Avedon as far as I'm concerned. It's a photograph.

STEVEN WATSON: And how would you describe what is more an Avedon?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Well, when he worked for *Junior Bazaar*, it was the kind of exhilaration of being young and vibrant and moving and excited by what he was doing and developing as Dick and becoming—nearing to his graduation to *Harper's Bazaar*, but still *Junior* at that point.

STEVEN WATSON: And that moving quality—is it about literal movement? Is it about being outside? Is it about—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: It's about being young.

STEVEN WATSON: Oh, is there—Lillian, is there any more you can say? Because I think that's really important.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: [Laughs.]

STEVEN WATSON: What constitutes being young? Is it about anything is possible? Again, I don't want to put words in your mouth.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Being young—it's existing in today's world with a positive attitude towards growth, towards life, a better movement, a better understanding of the world. I don't know, I can go on forever. You don't want me to.

STEVEN WATSON: Oh, well, I—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: No, that's enough.

STEVEN WATSON: That's enough, okay. How did you meet him?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: How did I meet Dick?

STEVEN WATSON: Yeah.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: That's a good question. I was working at *Harper's Bazaar* at the time, and he came in with a group of photographs that I thought showed promise but didn't excite me that much. But along the way, I watched his development, and we became friends. And one day I said to him that I was going out to Fire Island and would he like to join me and see what that was like. And so he and his wife at that time, Doe, and I met up with Paul. They had never met each other before. And we landed in Fire Island. Somehow that day we united, took a place together. Paul and Dick didn't know each other very—they didn't know each other at all. But they met on the boat and took to each other and to Doe, and we took the house together.

That was the beginning of our friendship, Paul and myself and Dick and Doe. And we spent the summer in Fire Island, and Dick and I would walk the beach for hours discussing what we would do with photographs for *Junior Bazaar*, how we would develop the stories. And occasionally Paul would join us, but not often. It was really Dick and myself who would endlessly talk about what we would do with *Junior Bazaar*.

STEVEN WATSON: Did you feel it was like a kind of, I don't know, equal relationship or art director versus photographer relationship or—anything about the dynamics.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: As I remember, it was on a very equal basis. I didn't feel like I was his superior in any way. I didn't feel like he—I was his director. We were both intensely interested in how we were going to develop this notion of a *Junior Bazaar*.

STEVEN WATSON: And that notion would be young fashion? New—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Well, not—wasn't so much fashion as it was journalistic ideas. Fashion was certainly part of it, but not part of the discussion.

STEVEN WATSON: Were you interested in written ideas as well as visual?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: No.

STEVEN WATSON: No.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: No. Everything was visual. We never—we never put pen to pen—paper in any way. Dick and I were not that kind. It was all talk, talk, talk, talk as we walked down the—on the beach.

STEVEN WATSON: But would you come up with sort of concepts like, I don't know, swimwear or—I don't know.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Not at that point. We weren't there yet.

STEVEN WATSON: Not at that—okay.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: That came later. Then we began to talk in specifics, but not then.

STEVEN WATSON: Okay, and when you say Fire Island, at this point what part of Fire Island? Did it have all the names, but—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Ah, one—it was Cherry Grove, and it was at the time when it was sort of a cultural center. It was Auden and theatrical people who were big directors. It was very much a cultural haven at that point.

STEVEN WATSON: Would Paul Cadmus, Lincoln Kirstein—would they be in this area? Or—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I don't remember them particularly—trying to think. Auden, yes. I'm a little brain-dead at the moment.

STEVEN WATSON: Okay. You know, we can figure all that—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: But there were—there were all the—it was not a gay community. Certainly there were gay people in it, but that wasn't the essence of Cherry Grove at the time. It was more a cultural haven at the—at that period.

STEVEN WATSON: Is there any way you can describe the house you shared with—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: [Laughs.] Ah, well.

STEVEN WATSON: I love that you laugh.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: It was—[laughs]—it was such a crummy cottage on the waterfront of the bay. We used to dig holes to bury our garbage. It had a kerosene stove. We pumped water for the—for the—for the water and the toilet. It was a bare-bones shack. Dick and Doe had their room. Paul and I had our room. There was a general room. We cooked on a kerosene stove where we made champagne eggs because had a very fancy friend at the time called Alexander MacDonald III, and he liked champagne eggs on this kerosene stove.

It was a shack. You know, it had—it had this one big room. I mean, Dick and Doe had their room. Paul and I had our room. It was a great big sort of dining, living room. And then there was a little room off the side where we had guests. That's all I can remember of the place except that it was pretty crummy. But then we paid something. We were—offered it for sale for \$650 or something. [Laughs.]

STEVEN WATSON: For sale? [Gasps.]

LILLIAN BASSMAN: But nobody—I don't know whether we didn't have the money or we—by that time we were sort of tired of the place.

STEVEN WATSON: [Laughs.]

LILLIAN BASSMAN: It was a dive. But we were happy, and it was full of sand and full of bathing suits and, you know, newspapers, magazines—

STEVEN WATSON: Yeah. Well—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: —and funny guests.

STEVEN WATSON: Yes, do you remember any of your funny guests?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Well, certainly Alexander MacDonald III was one of them.

STEVEN WATSON: [Laughs.]

LILLIAN BASSMAN: And there was a Deslute [ph] artist—a writer whose name escapes me at the moment, but we had a rather embarrassing goodbye with him. But I can't remember his name.

STEVEN WATSON: Okay. You know, always we can remember names later, so that's fine.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Right. That was Cherry Grove.

STEVEN WATSON: And you know, Cherry Grove later was certainly not just gay, but also very free about nudity. Was it at that time?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Well, Paul and I were nudists, so for us, it was no problem. Dick had a terrible problem with it, and Doe. It took them a very long time to accept it. I don't remember Dick actually ever being part of it, but Paul and I were as children, I suppose. And I think I've told you, but nudity was not one of my problems, and so, oh, Dick sort of accepted it. I don't know if—I don't remember his ever taking part, but Paul and I would, you know, run into the water nude or run down the beach, you know, doing our own thing. And Dick accepted it—didn't partake in it.

STEVEN WATSON: Now, you and Paul and Dick and Doe went later to Europe. I'm not so much asking the history of that, but I'm struck that four people can get along. I mean, anything you want to say about that?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I'm not—I don't know how you explain these things. Paul and Dick were very good friends, very accepting of each other. I certainly was. We traveled extremely well. We went to Europe with Dick and Doe, I think twice. There was never any friction. It was live and let live, completely. We never censored Dick. He never censored us. We made—we were really—the four of us were wonderful traveling companions.

STEVEN WATSON: And that includes Doe as well?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Oh yeah. It was Doe—

STEVEN WATSON: How would you describe her personality?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: At the time she was a charmer. She was very relaxed with us. I think that she and Dick were getting along very well at that time. I think the separate paths took place later. At that point, as a foursome, we were all on the same beam, enjoying the same things, crabbing about the same food, you know.

STEVEN WATSON: And you were in Italy?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: No.

STEVEN WATSON: What—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: You know—let's see. We left New York—yeah, we were in—we were in Italy most of the time.

STEVEN WATSON: And were these trips partly business?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: No.

STEVEN WATSON: No. They were not business at all.—they were pleasure.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Pleasure. Okay, later on Dick started to photograph, but those two trips were just purely pleasure. Later on we sort of shared time together, but part of that he worked for the *Bazaar*, and part we—Paul and I were traveling on our own—[coughs]—excuse me—and we would meet up later.

STEVEN WATSON: Well, I'm not going to show these right now, but I am struck by some of the beautiful photographs by Paul and by you, which are not fashion photographs or commercial photographs, but a lot of kids, a lot of—should I pull the big book out?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Sure. So this is finished?

STEVEN WATSON: Let's see—wait, let's see. Okay, so Dick—[inaudible]—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Well, it's—

STEVEN WATSON: Okay, let's do these last two. So we're now looking at January 1947, and after that April 1946. What strikes me is, you know, the photographs are fine, but they're simply used as elements—one which is entirely about circles. It may look old hat now—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Yeah.

STEVEN WATSON: Did it look old hat then?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I don't remember this. I don't even remember this spread.

STEVEN WATSON: Okay.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: What did I tell you?

STEVEN WATSON: Okay, tell me nothing. Here with the honeycomb—bees' honeycomb—again it's sort of interesting the way the concept is as important as the photograph.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Well, I think the concept is better than the—than the photograph. [Laughs.] The photographs don't look very exciting to me, but then we faced a lot of that sort of thing.

[Side conversation.]

STEVEN WATSON: You know, when—this is a big question, and you'll probably hate it.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: [Laughs.] Then I won't answer it.

STEVEN WATSON: Well, you know, you can just say, "Shut up." But if there's ways you can describe the different looks of Lieberman and Brodovitch, because isn't it right to think they are the two main art directors at this moment? So the difference between the way *Glamour* looked and the way *Harper's Bazaar* looked?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I don't remember ever really looking at *Glamour*.

STEVEN WATSON: Okay. Well, that's interesting, too. You really didn't look at it?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I don't think so. Does that answer your question? [Laughs.]

STEVEN WATSON: Yes. That was a very elegant way of getting rid of my question.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Okay.

STEVEN WATSON: Let me see if I can—you know, I love Eric's piece about the two of you. And if I put this heavy book on your lap, is that okay?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Sure. I'm a strong girl.

STEVEN WATSON: You're a strong—okay. You know, it's really—I look at these photographs, which I love, and they're not, like, characteristic of anything I particularly associate with you or Paul. So these—and these are from the European trips. You don't have to comment on them individually, but anything about how these subjects caught your eye or caught Paul's eye?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Well, Paul and I were really, I guess, interested in different things. I don't think these boys would have reacted to me the way they did to Paul. You know, two different people, two different characters.

STEVEN WATSON: What do you think in Paul allowed them to react this way?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Well, I think he was interested in them, and they responded to him. You know, Paul was a teacher before he became a photographer, and part of the excitement of this teaching was that the young—and he taught in boys' schools—was their response to him and, by association, their response to me. They used to say, "Hi, teach," you know.

STEVEN WATSON: [Laughs.]

LILLIAN BASSMAN: And I was the wife, and they would treat me like they—well, not like they treated him, but he was very much their teacher and very much loved by them. They all responded very well to him in the worst circumstances, and he would teach in schools with delinquent kids and problem children, you know. And something in him made them respond to him: "Hi, teach." You know, great respect, great love. None of that feeling of, he's a teacher, and I'm a student. And anyway, that was Paul and his response to kids.

STEVEN WATSON: And that's a kind of universal thing, being in a foreign country, and it's not about language or —

LILLIAN BASSMAN: No, just—

STEVEN WATSON: He projected that.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Just projected the acceptance, the love.

STEVEN WATSON: You know, later there's his interest in dance, his interest in the circus. At this point where he's not—he's not doing so much, I'll say, artistic pictures, what were the kinds of things that drew him—that

drew his interest? I mean, children is one.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: At that—at that point he met up with Brodovitch. And I think Brodovitch broadened his horizon photographically, and it included all sorts of—I don't know—you wouldn't call them journalistic ideas, but current—not current events, but current activities like the circus, like the—you know, the horse shows, you know, the—I don't know. They really—like Brodovitch's favorite expression, why to eat ham and eggs every day. You know, the idea was to experiment, to experience something new, to go outside your everyday activities. And so Paul went to the circus and to the—you know, the horse show, whatever.

STEVEN WATSON: And of course, he at some point was near Coney Island. Or—wrong?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Oh, he was brought up—he was brought up completely in Coney Island. So—

STEVEN WATSON: So it's not totally exotic.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Not at all. You know, his aunt was a circus performer.

STEVEN WATSON: I didn't know that.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Oh, yeah.

STEVEN WATSON: Oh, say more.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Huh?

STEVEN WATSON: Say more.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Say more. She was a snake charmer. [They laugh.] Yeah, that was aunt. She was a snake charmer who married the armless and legless wonder, and we used to go and watch her feed him. He had a special gadget. The fork was put on a swivel. And anyway, Paul and I were sort of brought up on the edge of the circus life, so we knew it quite well from the inside. We knew the armless and legless wonder. We knew the half man/half woman, you know, you name it. Georgia something—the Georgia peaches, whatever they were—well, that was all part of Coney Island and our experience with that part of life. And his aunt Jo [ph] was somebody that we both adored and who, I think wonderfully, in her middle age became the—not the mayor, but something in the community that she lived in—became a real political hack. And she was something else.

STEVEN WATSON: Wow.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: And she drove a truck. And he actually—the armless and legless guy drove a truck. He was a sign painter in his—oh, anyway, they were quite a couple. He was mean. He was jealous. He was tough. Paul and I had a hard time with him. He was sort of a German, almost a stormtrooper. Even though life existed through his mouth, you know, everything was—anyway, how did I get on to Aunt Jo [ph]? [Laughs.]

STEVEN WATSON: Well, Okay. Well, we—I led you there. I mean, I was asking about Paul being interested in the circus.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Oh.

STEVEN WATSON: And do you think Brodovitch encouraged that, or that was really Paul's—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Well, Brodovitch may have encouraged it, but this was Paul's whole childhood. It was his aunt Jo [ph], who he adored and who loved him, you know, and took care of him. And later on when he got drunk, she nurtured him. She was the one who was there with the—[inaudible]—and took care of him.

STEVEN WATSON: Okay.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: —and took care of him.

LIZZIE HIMMEL: Took care of dad?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Yeah.

LIZZIE HIMMEL: When he got drunk? Really? Never heard that.

[Side conversation.]

STEVEN WATSON: Okay, now, when you went to Europe with the—with the Avedons, I'm thinking we're about '58—I mean, '48, '49, '50. We can do the dates later. What—and is this kind of an early point of your picking up your own camera?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: No, I still—no, they were the photographers. I don't remember ever touching a camera.

STEVEN WATSON: Okay. Did you—you may not remember. Were there things you would see that you would visually think, oh, this is a picture? I'm—what I'm really interested in—what you were drawn to. And we know what Paul was drawn to.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I'm trying to remember. I can't believe that I didn't handle a camera. I don't remember. Did I—did I say to Paul, "Shoot that; look at that?" I must have because I'm a dictator at home.

STEVEN WATSON: [Laughs.] Well, and you look at things. You know, I mean, if any of these photographs strike you as kinds of things you might have said, "Oh,"—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Not that. Maybe this.

STEVEN WATSON: The so you're saying the child from the behind. We're now looking at the Paul Himmel-Lillian Bassman big book.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: We were always interested in the same people. I mean, I'm sure I know this little girl. Whether I—I didn't shoot her, but I may have said to Paul, "Look at that little girl," or "This little boy, look at him." I don't think I would have paid much attention to this.

STEVEN WATSON: To this group of children before a sign from '47?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: No.

STEVEN WATSON: Okay, what about this?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Well, this I remember completely. We were on a boat, I think, and the little boy was thinking about his next move. Here—I don't know where I was here. It was a gypsy thing. I think this was sort of completely Paul.

STEVEN WATSON: And this—we're looking now at a Spanish shot. It's a group shot. Yeah.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Yeah. Here again is Paul. Were we both interested in that little boy? I don't remember.

STEVEN WATSON: Yeah, no, I'm not expecting you to remember.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: This I remember very well.

STEVEN WATSON: This car coming over the river?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Over the river. That's when we were in Yugoslavia going through water, mud, Paul and myself. And here we are stuck in the mud. And how we got out, I don't remember. But that was our car with our luggage on top. And I know that at this point I used to wade in ahead of the car to see if—how deep it was and whether the car could pass through.

STEVEN WATSON: [Laughs.] Great.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: These I don't remember.

STEVEN WATSON: Okay. So this is just post World War II, and you two were very adventurous travelers.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Yeah, we—Dick and Doe—I think it—no, may have been Dick and Evelyn—arrived at the border of Yugoslavia, and we were allowed in. I don't remember at what point Dick turned back. And Paul and I went into Yugoslavia. And we were the first Americans allowed in at that time.

STEVEN WATSON: Really? [Gasps.]

LILLIAN BASSMAN: We had kind of trouble at the—at the—you know, the—

STEVEN WATSON: The border?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: The border. But we were allowed in, and Dick and Evelyn—I think it was Evelyn—turned back, and Paul and I went into Yugoslavia.

And there we had many adventures. We were in our little Simca, and we had all sorts of adventures with the car, with the—with the tires that didn't work. Anyway, we [spent ?] that. And then finally, at the end of that trip we were loaded onto a boat—really, hand-lifted—the car was hand-lifted onto the boat, and then we traveled back home. That was—there were many, many adventures of that trip, but the final—the last adventure was being hand-lifted onto the boat because the Yugoslavs said, "We said we could do it, and we're doing it." And they did.

STEVEN WATSON: [Laughs.] Was Paul very interested in taking photographs during this trip?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Yeah. I was, you know, sort of saying, you know, "Get that." But I wasn't shooting.

STEVEN WATSON: Yes.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: But always the director—you know, couldn't get keep my hands off it.

STEVEN WATSON: [Laughs.] Got it, got it. And what kind of camera was Paul using?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I don't remember. I really don't remember.

STEVEN WATSON: Okay. So before we leave *Junior Bazaar*, is there anything you want to say about Louis Faurer? Am I pronouncing it right?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Louis Faurer? He wasn't the mainstay. I don't know why. There was so many young people that I was interested in at the time. Louis was certainly one of them. I don't remember being more excited about him than anybody else. I certainly felt that I had found somebody exciting, but I don't remember being more interested in him than any other young people that were coming up at the time. So I did—you know, he was one of the finds. But—

STEVEN WATSON: And when—okay, two questions. When you talk about the younger people coming up, we're talking about a dozen that you worked with? Or roughly how many, very roughly?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Photographers?

STEVEN WATSON: Yeah.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Let's see. There was Landshoff, who Brodovitch worked with on the—that we worked with together, but Brodovitch was very interested in him, Dick, Louis. Right now I don't remember.

STEVEN WATSON: Okay.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I mean, we'd work with Paul. We'd work with Barkington [ph]. But that was like second choice. I don't remember too much.

STEVEN WATSON: Okay. So here's another kind of subjective question. So I think *Junior Bazaar*—it was essentially women that were doing most things. I mean, first of all, am I correct about that?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Yeah. I don't remember—I don't remember any men. And there was the literary department, the fashion department, the theater department. I don't remember any men on that—no. I can't think of one male that was—aside from Brodovitch at the beginning, I don't remember any. It all turned out to be young, vibrant women.

STEVEN WATSON: Now, I'm not going to try to push you into saying into anything feminist, so don't worry. But I'm curious, what do you think the effect—first of all, wasn't that unusual? And second—

[END OF AUDIO TRACK AAA_bassma11_1129.]

STEVEN WATSON: How do you think that affected the way the magazine worked?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I don't think it had any effect because a good—a good many of the people that had been trained at *Harper's Bazaar* transferred to *Junior Bazaar* in the end, maybe due to the editor we had at that time. I

don't know. It turned into a magazine about young people, about schools, universities. There was a lot of that when I—I'm trying to remember—I know there were a lot of articles, but my head only remembers the—I don't know.

STEVEN WATSON: Fine. So I want to now get to when you got your first camera and began photographing. And how did that come about?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I came up to visit Brodovitch one day to tell him that I was no longer connected to *Junior Bazaar* and that I had to make my next move. And he said to me, "Why not become a photographer with me?" I think that—vaguely, that's how I remember it going. I'm—let me think for a moment. I know I visited Brodovitch on my last day, and I had to decide where I was going to go, what I was going to become. And also, with Brodovitch, I used to do—and I don't know how this happened. I don't know whose camera I used. I would do illustrations for the *Bazaar*, sometimes with the camera. I don't remember. It's hard for me to remember how it came aback, but—about.

Anyway, in that talk with Brodovitch, I decided I was going to try my hand at becoming a photographer. I had done the art directing. I had been involved with photographers. I was involved with Paul. And it seemed natural for me to turn in that direction.

STEVEN WATSON: Do you know what year we're talking about?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: No.

STEVEN WATSON: Okay. We'll figure that out later. Do you know what your first camera was?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I didn't have a first camera. My first involvement with photography came with a suggestion by Dick that since I was interested in photography, I should take his studio for the summer when he was going to Paris and his studio was free and all his equipment and his darkroom and his assistant were available. And I took him up on that.

And—trying to see how this developed. I don't remember exactly. I know that in his studio, I never handled the camera, but I used to stand next to it and tell his—you know, like a director, tell his assistant to put a light here, to move there.

Anyway, the upshot of it was that I did a photograph of a young girl, who showed my photographs of her to her husband, who worked as an art director in a—in an agency. And I don't know why I'm telling you this.

STEVEN WATSON: No, because—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: [Inaudible.]

STEVEN WATSON: Important. This is about your beginnings.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I'm trying—yeah. And the—she showed him the photographs I did of her. And I got a campaign. I don't—no, I was a born art director, a born—I had been around photographs all my mature life. None of it seemed out of range for me. So I hadn't handled a camera. Somebody else handled the camera. But I knew enough to know how to make a photograph. I had also, you know, spent all that time in the darkroom even though—not using my negatives, but using Huene's negatives. I had to learn how to print, how to—how to see a photograph, how to live with it.

Even though I hadn't actually produced it, I produced all the elements. And it all came to fruition, you know. It blossomed into a major career for me as a photographer. I learned how to handle my camera, which was a Rolleiflex. When I was sent to Paris to do the collection, I could tell an assistant who had never been near a camera how to load it, how to—you know, even though I myself didn't do it. But I knew how it was done. I don't know.

STEVEN WATSON: Did some of this, you know—you know, loading, et cetera—did some of this you learned from Paul? Or was it really about the other photographers?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I'm trying to think. I don't think Paul ever—I think it came sort of like necessity. I mean, I had watched many a photographer load a camera. It came, you know, sort of naturally after a while.

STEVEN WATSON: Makes sense. Did you think when you began photographing that you would be involved primarily with fashion and the things you already knew, I mean, the world that was familiar to you?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: It had to do with being involved—not fashion; lingerie, the intimate life of a woman. Being about—around young women, I didn't know anything about photographing fashion, but I knew about

photographing women, women in their lingerie, in their natural habitat. Fashion was far beyond me at the time, at least I wasn't interested in it, or I hadn't yet grown up to it. I did what came naturally in the way of photographing, which was being involved with young women, being involved with their bodies and their way of life, I guess.

STEVEN WATSON: At this time was—were there—was it unusual, photographs of lingerie? Were there rules about how much you could show?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Well, there were rules among the—among the agencies that allowed their models to be involved with lingerie. The Fords would not allow their models to have anything to do with that.

But some of the models loved working with me and agreed to work with me on the condition that they weren't literally shown, they were—and so we developed a language with each other, how to produce your body, your interest, your feeling for lingerie without actually showing your features as being—who was the top model at the time who would—what's her name? I'll think of her name in a minute. She was happy to work with me, happy to go along with the deception of who she was and yet express who she was with her body, her gestures, respond to me, and all with the knowledge that we weren't going to show the features of her face so that—

STEVEN WATSON: Fascinating. And what were some of the strategies for—looking away? Shadowing it?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Oh, lifting your arm up so that—because if your face—well, the recognizable part of your face didn't show. Normal, natural poses without emphasis on what you were hiding, at the same time not giving the viewer full range of your—of the details of your face.

STEVEN WATSON: Okay.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: So we had Dorian Leigh, who was a top model at the time, a top Ford model. And the Fords didn't know what she was doing, but because it was me and because she trusted me, we did some beautiful photographs together.

STEVEN WATSON: Would, for example, Dorian Leigh want to look at the photographs afterwards to okay it?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: No.

STEVEN WATSON: Or she just—it—no.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: She just trusted me.

STEVEN WATSON: God. Fascinating.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: And I would never—I would never jeopardize her position.

STEVEN WATSON: Yeah. So here again I want to put the heavy book on your lap. And we're looking at Bassman and Himmel, roughly pages—I don't see the pages. But, you know, I would like you to look at some of these photographs. For example—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Who is that? Top model—Carmen.

STEVEN WATSON: Carmen?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Yeah. Willing to pose in lingerie. Again, how do you explain it? I don't know. Trusting, trusting me not to make her face too literal, and yet—with full acknowledgment of what her body conveyed. What was this for, the *Bazaar*?

STEVEN WATSON: I think so. I know on this page, Glenda Bailey, *Harper's Bazaar*—you know, makes a quote.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: No. Yeah. It was for *Harper's Bazaar*. I don't know what to say about this photograph, except —

STEVEN WATSON: Well, it's—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: You know, it was Carmen, but—what?

STEVEN WATSON: I mean, first of all, I think, to me, it's beautiful. It—abstract is not the right word, but it's very formal. I—it's not particularly erotic to me, but the beauty is in the form. And it looks to me like the model feels very free and comfortable. So that's my opinion. And I can't help but think the freedom also comes from you.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Well, I think Carmen trusted me completely, trusted that I would fulfill her desire to show me

what she thought was beautiful about her body and that I would make it possible for her to show herself in this way, which made her body more important and her use of movement more important than any facial thing could do.

STEVEN WATSON: Yeah. So she was a top model at this time?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Oh, yeah.

STEVEN WATSON: Now, there's a difference between top models at that time and the supermodels of later. Is that—is that true?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I don't—I lost touch with the supermodels of later. They turned me off. She was a top model, you know. Supermodel—

STEVEN WATSON: I'm just throwing out some words, you know, but—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Yeah, supermodel at the time.

STEVEN WATSON: Okay. With Carmen, is there any way you can say what made her a good model for you?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Well, for one thing, she had all the physical attributes, the long neck, the ability respond to my direction, the body that was full and graceful at the same—you know, but it was body. It wasn't a stick. It had flesh, it had a bosom, it had an ass, you know.

STEVEN WATSON: This is more about you, but the fact that you had come up through art direction and directing and, you know, not just—not primarily photographing, do you think that changed the interaction between you and the models? Or how do you think that affected your interaction with the models, plus the fact that you're very comfortable with your own body?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Yeah, I think it came through all my experiences as a dancer, as a museumgoer, my whole visual upbringing through the museums, through the dancing, through the nudity, I think a whole culmination of my experience as a woman and a complete appreciation of other women, without a sexual connotation, but a real acceptance.

STEVEN WATSON: Who might have been other lingerie photographers that would engender that comfort and appreciation at that time?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: There was a photographer by the name of Shaw [ph] who was very commercial, very aware of movement and of beautiful women, but who remained a commercial photographer, didn't go beyond the ads that he did for that period, though some of them are quite beautiful. But they didn't have the soul.

STEVEN WATSON: What?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: They didn't have the soul.

STEVEN WATSON: They didn't have the soul. Okay. Got it. Did you think of a desire to have a soul in your photographs at that time?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Very much so.

STEVEN WATSON: Very much so. Okay. So it wasn't—I don't know, commerce is certainly part of it. But you were—you were looking for something different?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: What I did for commerce was totally different. And I made a lot of money at that time in commerce, but that was not part of this expression.

STEVEN WATSON: Okay. For example, the photograph we're looking at now with Carmen, to me, this is not particularly—to me, this has a lot of soul. Was it quite different the way you worked with—for commerce?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Oh, yeah. Completely different. It was, like, saying hard-core as compared to—you know, it was out-and-out commerce. It was to make money to pay for doing this kind of photography, you know. I made a living at that time. I had a home, and Carmen and I had children together, but that had nothing to do with making money. That was something else.

STEVEN WATSON: Yeah, okay.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: There's a complete divide.

STEVEN WATSON: In the books that I know of yours, are there any of the, quote/unquote, "commerce photographs?" Or did you—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Well, it depended on the client. There was—I think it was a wool manufacturer that had an editor or a designer that I respected that I did a campaign for that I would not have been ashamed to show for *Harper's Bazaar*, so that—yeah, there were clients that I knocked myself out for and who I came up with new kinds of lighting, new kinds of textures—you know, interest in textures.

STEVEN WATSON: In the photograph itself?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: In the photograph itself. As I say, depending on the client, it could be a creative experience or it could be a knockout, you know, just anything. Mostly I tried to stay with clients that I felt—and I mostly did at that time—worked with people who appreciated my kind of sensitivity. And it wasn't flat-out commercial, it was more of a creative outlet.

STEVEN WATSON: And was this pretty much always about women in some capacity?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: No. There were art directors that I—male art directors that I worked with.

STEVEN WATSON: I'm—meaning as subject. Did you—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Oh, as subject.

STEVEN WATSON: As subject.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: At that point I had never photographed a male, not in that sense. Later on I did.

STEVEN WATSON: But at this point it was—it was women?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Mostly.

STEVEN WATSON: And you know, there was something called the "New Look" in terms of fashion, postwar. Is that a term you're familiar with?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Oh, yeah.

STEVEN WATSON: Okay. I don't know what to say, but how that affected what you were looking at and photographing—I don't know, when you're within it, if you're even aware of it, but now we categorize it.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Well, I began to photograph more fashion. I became interested in newer techniques with the fashion. You know, all these years I have been changing and developing and growing closer to recognizing the fact that I could deal with women in the fashion world as well as in the lingerie world, being exposed to it and growing up in it and changing with it and changing my techniques and my attitudes. You know, it was a matter of development from one kind of photography to another, to becoming a "fashion" photographer, "fashion" in quotes.

STEVEN WATSON: [Laughs.] In quotes. And during this, what can I say, the early years of yours photographing, this coincides with some of Paul's very interesting work, the Grand Central, the circus. Am I—am I wrong?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Well, I think we were all under the sway of Brodovitch. He and his—and his direction, you know, I admired.

STEVEN WATSON: In terms of you and Paul, did you talk about your photographs? Did you—you know, it's not that common to have a close husband and wife that are working in the same field, even if it's quite different. And I would love to know how you and Paul—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: How we interacted?

STEVEN WATSON: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I was completely taken with his experimental work, with his photographs in Harlem and his photographs in the circus. I had no faith in his ability to work the fashion world. Why this isn't so, I don't know, because he certainly was brought up in the fashion world. His mother was a creative designer on her own. He always had me on his side. Somehow he missed, in my opinion, being able to cope with the fashion world. Why this was, I have no idea, except that—

[Sound.] Oh, that's just the wind.

[Side conversation.]

STEVEN WATSON: So you were saying why this was: You're not quite sure, but you felt he really couldn't cope with the fashion world?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: There's something about it with his inability to accept that kind of—he never came to terms with—for instance, with my association with Mrs. Snow. He was always sort of outside of that.

STEVEN WATSON: When you say he couldn't come to terms with your association with Mrs. Snow, what do you mean?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I don't know.

STEVEN WATSON: Was it that—okay.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I guess she never accepted him. He never accepted her. He became like a bull in a China closet with her around. It brought out the renegade in him. I don't know. It was that—maybe he felt she was anti-Semitic—and why that should be, since I was very Jewish. But I don't know if Mrs. Snow ever felt that way about me. But I know that she never accepted him.

STEVEN WATSON: Okay. And vice versa—he didn't accept her. Okay, Lillian, I think it's a good moment to stop for today.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Okay.

STEVEN WATSON: I have loved this.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: It's okay with you today?

STEVEN WATSON: Oh, it's really good.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Okay.

STEVEN WATSON: I'm curious, how do you feel about this technique of looking at photographs and—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Oh, I love it. Especially what you chose.

STEVEN WATSON: I think it's a—I think it's a good way to talk about photography.

I want to make sure I turn this off for us. Okay.

[END OF AUDIO TRACK AAA_bassma11_1130.]

[Side conversation.]

STEVEN WATSON: Anyway, I should say, we are now October 29, 2011, Steven Watson and Lillian Bassman in Lillian Bassman's studio.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Yes.

STEVEN WATSON: Okay. So we were talking about some of your photographs for *Harper's Bazaar*, particularly. And, you know, one thing that strikes me about both your work and Paul's work is how semi-abstract it is. I mean, there's a real sense of, you know, your form is certainly not just about showing something that people were wearing.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Right.

STEVEN WATSON: And was there any way you developed that idea, particularly, or did it just—or is that also, do you think, some kind of influence of Brodovitch?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: It's hard for me to remember that far back.

STEVEN WATSON: Okay.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I don't get what you're aiming at in this—

STEVEN WATSON: Okay, I'll pull out some books. [Pause.] Just for example, the way a lot of the white—I don't know whether we say it's masked or there is a very high contrast that I think comes after the shooting. This was

mostly done in the studio?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Done in the darkroom.

STEVEN WATSON: I mean, not this studio—done in the darkroom. That's what I meant.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Yeah. I think—

STEVEN WATSON: For example, we're looking on page 107 of Lillian Bassman's *Women*, and there's certainly a lot that you've done beyond the actual shooting.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Beyond the seating, all done in the darkroom.

STEVEN WATSON: It's all done in the darkroom, yeah.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I mean, the gestures, the thrusting, the throat, the head—that's done in the sitting. Whatever happens after that is completely darkroom—the contrast, the bleaching, the forms that surround the girl.

I mean, they're all done on plain gray no seam paper and then in the darkroom with the bleach and the cotton and the whatever. Whatever goes into the emotional take in the darkroom and stuff happens in there with the water and the bleach and the brushes and the cottons and the—[inaudible]—and you know.

STEVEN WATSON: So what I'm seeing here for this, this is all—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: It's completely—this is—if you saw the original, this is all against a plain gray background. None of this exists, except in my head as I put it in the—as I develop the print, put it in the hypo and then begin to work my magic.

STEVEN WATSON: Okay. That's what I was trying to express when I was talking about the abstraction, or that there's not a, you know, connection to the very specific image—that there's a lot you do.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: This is all darkroom. It was all new cotton, and I would splat it, you know, whatever—whatever mood takes me in that specific moment.

STEVEN WATSON: Were you unusual in how much you did in the darkroom, in that way?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I would say yes. I don't know of anybody at that point—you know, now, with computers and that, people are doing it. At that time, I don't think anybody was experimenting with that or involved in it in any way.

STEVEN WATSON: How do you think you came to this?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I'm sorry I'm so sort of congested, but that's all right.

STEVEN WATSON: That's fine.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: You'll translate. I think I started out as a painter, and so I was always creating moods around what I was doing. I don't know. How did anybody develop their technique or way of seeing, whether it's linear, not linear, scene paintings, skies, architecture, things going on around the subject? Whether it's Christ or Mary or, you know, whoever, the artist always builds a circumstance for them to be there. And that's, I think, what I was trying to do.

STEVEN WATSON: Well, it certainly comes through very strongly. And you know, for me, it's a look that's not familiar from times in this period. So some of your—a lot of your work was done in the studio against a no-shadow background.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: This was an old painting that was enlarged and made into a screen and, you know—or a backdrop. And then I sort of created a place for her to be, but not literally, you know.

STEVEN WATSON: And we're looking at page 151 in Lillian Bassman's *Women*. So this could look recognizable as being outside?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Oh, yeah. I mean, it was a photographic background that was really what it was—you know, trees and whatever.

STEVEN WATSON: Did you very often actually work outside of the studio?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Yeah, but only when I was—yeah, but then I would diffuse or, you know, do my thing with the background that would make it more me than—I mean, like I photographed in the opera house in Paris, but it would be a kind of dreamlike place—you would not see the staircase and the chandeliers and, you know, would not be sharp. And you would just get the atmosphere of where it might be.

STEVEN WATSON: Now, for example—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: This?

STEVEN WATSON: Yeah, page 155. There's both motion in this and—anything you want to say about this?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: What can I say? I don't know. The beautiful back. I think the excitement was in the movement of the fingers was supposed to be, you know, patting her back or whatever.

STEVEN WATSON: And Paul is someone who used this kind of movement, where it becomes shadowy and almost ghostlike.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Like this, except I finished long before I ever saw anything of Paul's work that wasn't, you know—

STEVEN WATSON: Commercial?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: —commercial.

STEVEN WATSON: Okay. I love this. I really love it. Now, you know, you worked with a number of quite-famous models and many that are, you know—Ford Modeling Agency, so they're at a certain level. But we don't remember them like we would—Suzy Parker or some of them. I don't know what to ask about specific models, but did they respond easily to your direction?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Oh, very. The models who were Ford models and not allowed to work for me as lingerie models then—we had a conversation thing. I knew that we were stepping out of bounds. These were models that I loved because of the way they moved, the way they thought, the way they reacted to me.

And so we had an understanding. They would give me everything in the body, in the gesture, in the shape of the head, as long as we didn't show their—the features of their face too clearly—not that I would have anyway because most of them are—so for instance, we developed this as a gesture, you know.

STEVEN WATSON: The hiding the face with the shadows.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: And another one, you know. So here, her head is cropped out, but you wouldn't have seen her face. You would have seen the gesture of her body, the gesture of her fingers, the whatever. And yet, you know, there's the ability to give me what I wanted in the sense of movement of the body, itself.

STEVEN WATSON: With the models you worked with—and I know there's a range—but did a lot of them have a real sense of their own on how to move, or did you direct very much?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: [Coughs.] Well, I wouldn't use models who didn't know how to move—who couldn't understand when I said, "Curve your back, pull your stomach in, throw your head, you know, wherever." They understood how I felt about body movement, how I felt about shoulders, arms.

I mean, you develop a group of women who are models. They—[coughs]—would work with you and understand without having to go through this every time—what I mean by, you know, whatever gesture I'm thinking. You know, you develop a language with the model. They understand you; you understand them.

STEVEN WATSON: And this takes place over a period of time.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Right.

STEVEN WATSON: Do you think you could name some of the models that felt like your regulars? I know last time you talked about Carmen.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Evelyn Tripp, Barbara Mullen, certainly. You know, there are like a handful who, with time, they get to know you and you get to know them. And sometimes—you know, rarely—you find someone who—well, I did in the past 20 years, but I can't remember her name. It's a very long—what was her name? Anyway—

STEVEN WATSON: We can add it in later.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Yeah, who understood my body language. And I felt that she could—she had the neck. She had, you know, the throat. I'll think of her name later. So that, you know, you don't find them often, but you find them, you know. You outgrow your favorite models. They get too old, or they go off to Europe or, you know, they get married or whatever. You can't hang your coat onto them forever, and so you find new people who, with a little time and patience, you can find that they can respond to your direction and your moods. And you know, I've found a few.

STEVEN WATSON: Would you primarily find them through the modeling agencies?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Oh, yeah.

STEVEN WATSON: And besides Ford, what was there?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Well, we used Ford, didn't we? Not for everything. Wilhelmina. What was the last one we used? I'll get that name.

STEVEN WATSON: We'll add it later, yeah. And did you work with one of those agencies more than the others?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Well, for fashion, I worked with the Fords. I worked with Wilhelmina. I forget the last one.

STEVEN WATSON: Okay. Now, when you're working as a photographer—and at this point, at Harper's Bazaar—what would be the way Carmel Snow—would Carmel Snow give you the assignment, or would it be Mrs. Vreeland? I want to know the kind of direction you were given.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Always by Brodovitch. I mean, Brodovitch was the lord and master of the magazine. Assignments were always assigned by Brodovitch, never by Mrs. Snow. Never by—well, whether she worked with other photographers like that—like, who assigned Dahl-Wolfe, I don't know. But it was always Brodovitch.

They'd hand you two pages. "On this side, I need"—[inaudible]—but, you know, I'll mention it—introduce me to the fashion editor. And then it would be out of his hands as far as models were concerned, as far as what the clothing—what to wear. And then I would bring in the photographs to him, never to the fashion editor. Everything always went directly to Brodovitch.

STEVEN WATSON: And that was the photographs, directly, or the photographs after you had done a lot of work in the darkroom?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Well, no, I never showed him contacts or anything. I would bring in photographs that I worked on.

STEVEN WATSON: So the cotton and the bleaching and all of that—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Had been done.

STEVEN WATSON: —had been done. Did he often have much feedback to give you, at that point?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: No. If he didn't like it, he would say redo it, you know. I would—that was the feedback—[laughs] —you know, or bring in another print. You know, make another choice.

STEVEN WATSON: But it wasn't, "Do a new version and I want it more dark here, or I want"—he wouldn't give you—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: No, no. He would just say—he wouldn't even say there's no life in them. Either he liked it or he didn't like it, simple as that.

STEVEN WATSON: And he worked with you for a long time. And you know, regarding the work you did in the darkroom—and again, I say this seems, to me, very advanced at that time—and I'm wondering how much might have been contributed to by the fact that you knew about production. You weren't simply a photographer. You knew the whole—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Yeah, that was about the physical layout of the magazine. That had nothing to do with what I did in the darkroom. I mean, it didn't influence me in any way. I mean, that all happened after the photograph, you know.

STEVEN WATSON: And your darkroom—can you describe what your darkroom was like, where it was, how big it was? Did you work with assistants? All of those things.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Well, the first—I'm trying to think what came first. At that point that I was starting, Paul and I

had the whole house. The basement had the dryers, the washers. I had a darkroom. There was a darkroom for the loading and whatever of the cameras. I had a darkroom. Paul had a darkroom. I had an assistant. Paul had an assistant. My darkroom had a long table with, you know, the usual running water, the washer, whatever. The enlarger was on the side, and there was this long trough.

The assistants never really—I don't think they ever worked with me in the darkroom while I was printing. I would take my negatives, print on the paper. And then there was this long trough, and there was a—[inaudible]. And I would put the paper in the tray and then in the wash or whatever so that there was one tray, two trays, and then the last tray, in which—I had two trays, actually, in the last one with a slab of glass across where I put the developed print and then this large sheet of glass on which I—and underneath it was the hypo, or whatever.

And then I would take the print, put it on the glass, take my brushes or my cotton and whatever and, on top of this glass, I would work the sections that I wanted to obliterate, you know, or create the mood. Develop it, and then the assistants would come in. And they had to then wash—[inaudible]—the assistant would come in and dry the print, put it in the—you know, go through the regular process from there.

STEVEN WATSON: So the assistants didn't do anything that required much learning.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: No, they were not in the darkroom with me unless I was in trouble with an exposure or something. But no, the darkroom was mine. To do my dreaming or whatever, you know.

STEVEN WATSON: Yes, yes. And when you worked with cotton and brushes, would they be painter's brushes? Did you have a lot of different sizes? I mean—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: No, no, no. I had one brush. I had cotton swabs. I had cotton balls, you know. And that was it.

STEVEN WATSON: And the chemicals that you'd be working with—would it be bleach? Would it be—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Yeah, a lot of bleach. You know, it'd be a lot of cyanide, I don't know. And then I would—when I was through, the assistant would wash the print, dry it.

STEVEN WATSON: Lillian, you know, it's like making a painting, in a way, and I'm wondering whether you very often got what you wanted early. Or did you make many attempts with the same images?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Oh, yeah. I mean, all of this was not that controlled, but I didn't develop it as I went along. I mean, if I made a print and I saw that this was too dark, you know, I would make another one. I redid it, and if that wasn't right, I'd go to the next one, you know. It was a day's work. It didn't happen in two minutes.

STEVEN WATSON: Got it. I had no idea about your technique with cotton and bleach. Would you show these—the finished prints—to Paul?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: No.

STEVEN WATSON: No.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Paul really didn't—no, he wasn't that—we weren't that dependent on each other's work. When it was a big thing—when he was doing the dance—you know, the book—or when it was an exhibition, say, then it was different. But on the day-to-day? No. He was busy. I was busy, you know. I was shooting at the same time.

STEVEN WATSON: I was very interested that both you and Paul had been interested in performing and dance—that he, at one point, had wanted to work with Martha Graham.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Right, right. You know, Paul and I danced together from, I think, the day we met. It was how we became interested in each other, I think. I think it was almost the first night that we rolled up the carpet and danced together. It was always—from the beginning, it was a relationship that was very involved with dancing with each other.

STEVEN WATSON: Now I'm moving towards Paul's book about dance. That's mostly what we would now call the New York City Ballet, that he worked with, yeah?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Yeah. I didn't work with them. Paul did.

STEVEN WATSON: Paul did.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: At that point, we were on 40th Street. And he started to work with the New York City Ballet company, I guess. And I would watch him as he counted out the steps and counted out the movements. And not

that I was involved in any way, but I watched his whole process. Then when it came to doing the book, I understood exactly how he achieved what he did and what excited him. And together, I guess we chose the photographs and composed the book. I had, at that point showed the—what do you call it—the manuscript? Whatever.

STEVEN WATSON: The blues or the early—okay.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: —to Brodovitch, and Brodovitch gave his benediction. And then, because Paul worked with Vogue, he showed these to Liberman. And Liberman said, "You have to have more still photographs," and I said, "No, you don't have to have more still photos." Anyway, we had a little fight about that, but—

STEVEN WATSON: You and Paul or Liberman—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Me and Paul because I didn't have anything to do with Liberman, at that point. But I tried to outvote Liberman completely. I didn't succeed. And to this day, I regret that I didn't succeed more, but very few of the stills were in the book. But anyway, how did I get lost?

STEVEN WATSON: Well, I led the way to get lost. We were talking about Paul's process. And first of all, you know, it was revolutionary what he was doing, in terms of showing motion.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Yeah.

STEVEN WATSON: So can you describe, as clearly as possible, how he did that and how he got so it wasn't just one big blur? There's articulation and blur, both.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Oh, God. How did I get more on Liberman. He got his. He had a very strong sense of what he wanted to do, photographically. And his approach was very much not mine. He was his own photographer. The only time I ever watched him photograph was when he was photographing the dancers, mostly because I was interested in the dancers. I wasn't contributing anything. I wasn't criticizing anything.

I mean, I certainly went over the contacts very carefully. And with him, we selected what we thought were the best movements or the best attitudes. But I did it only as an art director. I wasn't telling him what to do. I was only looking at what he had done and then translating it into a page.

STEVEN WATSON: But the question I'm asking is more about, did he rehearse—I mean, the dancers rehearse with him and he would say stop at a certain point? Was it continual? I mean, how he gets some things that look ghostlike and some which are quite articulate—do you remember how he made that happen?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Well, he helped define the movement, and then on the contact sheet would choose those that most represented what he wanted in the way of a body movement or gesture.

STEVEN WATSON: But it wasn't a matter of their doing a movement and his asking for them to be stationary for a second before they continued?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: No. No, he had them—

STEVEN WATSON: Okay. You know, I'm struck, looking at the other pictures of the New York—photographs of the New York City Ballet by George Platt Lynes—how they're completely different.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Oh, no.

STEVEN WATSON: They're another universe.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Right. And he did them in actual movement. It wasn't stop movement. It wasn't somebody took a ballet pose, and he photographed it. He did the whole movement.

STEVEN WATSON: To me, this looks like a brilliant book.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Except the still photographs. And the fact that we lost one of the best ballets. The printer lost the last ballet. [They laugh.] I don't know how that happened, but it happened.

STEVEN WATSON: Yeah. How was the book received at that time?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I don't really know.

STEVEN WATSON: I mean, I think it looks like a kind of classic now.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Yeah. Well, I think in a small way, I mean, there were—I remember there was an exhibition

at what the ICP was then on 102nd Street in which there were some of Paul's ballet pictures. Widely received? No—among photographers.

STEVEN WATSON: Well, then, of course, very few people considered photography an art or important.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: That's right.

STEVEN WATSON: That's a whole different world.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Right, right.

STEVEN WATSON: You know, also, Paul's—I'm going to pull another example—like, the Grand Central Station photos, which I love—one second, or more than one second. So we're now looking at the large Grand Central Station with the still man in the middle. Do you think he asked this man to stand still, or was this a random, fortuitous thing?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Gee, I don't remember. I know that we went to Grand Central—Paul and I—and he did this photograph. And then he decided that, that would be a great way to do fashion. And so we went back, but by then, he had, had a fashion model placed so that it was the one, stationary figure. And he would either have lots of movement or not so much, you know. So that it started out as an experiment. We went to Grand Central.

And at that time, I went as his assistant, or what, I don't remember. And he stood on a balcony, overlooking, and he did his photographs. This is not one of them—the first one. And then I think he showed them to Brodovitch or some—yeah, it must have been Brodovitch, at the time. You know, he was a student of Brodovitch's, too. He showed them to Brodovitch, and then he went back with the model and recreated the same kind of—maybe not this photograph; I don't remember which one it was.

STEVEN WATSON: Okay. So there was one figure who was designated to be the model.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I mean, I know that he did a women's fashion thing in that situation. But it started out as an experiment and grew. He brought the photographs to Brodovitch, and then it grew into an assignment.

STEVEN WATSON: Did Paul love this series?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Oh, yeah. I mean, this was important to him. It was not his fight with the fashion world, you know. It was his expression of New York or whatever. The model was sort of incidental but—it was his photograph.

STEVEN WATSON: Absolutely. And to my knowledge, I don't know of other photographs like this.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: No.

STEVEN WATSON: Do you think Liberman would have let this go through?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I don't know.

STEVEN WATSON: Okay, okay. I'm just saying, Brodovitch had a very different attitude towards photographs than Alexander Liberman. Okay. So we're looking—what's the date about here? '46? Yeah. We're looking at *Harper's Bazaar*, a cover, 1946. Now, one thing that strikes me is this almost looks like what was solarization in photographs years later.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Ernst Beadle.

STEVEN WATSON: Yep, yep.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: And he was a great experimental photographer. I don't know why his reputation didn't last, why people have forgotten about him. But he was a strange one. Maybe that's why, you know. I don't know emotionally what happened to him, but he sort of disappeared off the map.

STEVEN WATSON: No, for example, this—was a lot done in the darkroom, do you think? Was this about lighting?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Ernst? No. It was done in the—it was not lighting. I don't know what Ernst did. Nowadays, I would say it's a computer. [They laugh.]

STEVEN WATSON: Exactly, yeah. Yep, so the contacts—do you remember—I think there's a picture of Patricia McBride. So she was dancing at that point, I guess?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Yeah, she was there.

STEVEN WATSON: It's not a picture of her as a dancer.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: No, no, no. This was done at Bryant by [inaudible]. Beautiful picture, ain't it?

STEVEN WATSON: Beautiful picture. Beautiful woman; beautiful picture. Was she at the height of her career, yet?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: No. No, she was just a very young dancer to be in the picture.

STEVEN WATSON: Were there any dancers you remember being particularly struck by at that time?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Martha Graham.

STEVEN WATSON: Martha Graham. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I was not a great ballet fan. On the toe and those gestures didn't mean very much to me.

STEVEN WATSON: Well, it's certainly very different than the Martha Graham, expressive technique.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: But of course, I went to all the dance concerts at that time. I'm trying to think of—I don't know, do you remember Fred Smith?

STEVEN WATSON: I know who he is. I, of course, never saw him. And was Mary Wigman ever—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Oh, yeah. You name them. I can't remember their names now. You know, we went to all the dance concerts. I may not have been a huge ballet fan. On the other hand—we didn't miss Nureyev. You know, ballet on the toes didn't interest me. But in general, you know, how could you not get excited?

STEVEN WATSON: And it's often said that the crowd that was at dance—and maybe particularly New York City ballet—was a very interesting crowd of people. [They laugh.] Okay, again—and we're looking at Suzy Parker with a black background. Again, this was done in a studio and highly worked by you in the darkroom?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Yeah. You know, the movement was the important part to me, not the background. I mean, the idea was to concentrate on this part.

STEVEN WATSON: She's one of the best-known models of that time.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Suzy?

STEVEN WATSON: Yeah.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Yeah, not necessarily my favorite. Suzy didn't move the way I envisioned movement. Apparently, she was beautiful. And I did some, I must say—

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LILLIAN BASSMAN: I did some lingerie photographs of her where the expression carried more than the body. And I was able to make use of that part of her. And you know, she was a beautiful girl with a beautiful neck and responsive—understood the camera. So that while she was never my favorite fashion model, I used her a lot in lingerie. We'll come out in the next picture.

STEVEN WATSON: You know, it almost seems perverse to be using a model who's famous for her face and not being able to show her face. I'm not saying that—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Well, times changed. We won the battle.

STEVEN WATSON: Of course. We're now looking 1955, and it looks like we're at a bullfight.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: But we're not. We're in the studio. And I had a large—an enlargement made of a bullfight. And then I had the girls stand in front of it like they were part of the bullfight. And then it became a matter of the gesture and the stance. I don't know what to say about it.

STEVEN WATSON: Well, was it expensive to make such a large photographic backdrop?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I didn't make it inside.

STEVEN WATSON: Yes, I know, but—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I don't think so. You know, it was a cheap photosnap background. It was sent off to a site, you know.

STEVEN WATSON: There's this lovely picture, also.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: It's funny they chose one without the dog. She was incredible. You know, she was a pilot.

STEVEN WATSON: And we are looking at—is it Suzy Parker?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: No, no.

STEVEN WATSON: No, this is—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Lisa Fonssagrives.

STEVEN WATSON: Oh, oh, yes. Oh, say more about her.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Well, at this point, Lisa was married to Penn. She was, what, 45? I don't remember exactly how old she was. She was a pilot. She was an adventurer. She was a great model of Penn, became a sculptress, did some beautiful work, was a lover of Irving Penn. At this point, I don't remember what she was doing. We had the sitting. She had a dog next to her. But I don't know what happened in this photograph. The dog doesn't show.

She was riding in one car, and you know, she was an aviatrix. She was a daredevil, you know. She was driving. I was standing in a car, driving opposite her. And I would call to her and say, "Your scarf is blowing. Pull it back. Do this." She would do that. All the time, we were driving side-by-side, and she would respond to me and I would say, you know, "Look out, look there, move a little faster so that the background moves a little bit."

And it was quite a scene, you know. She would lift her hands off the wheel and fix her scarf, you know, like that. But she understood movement. She understood me. She responded to anything I told her. "Move your head, turn around"—you know. And we were racing—I don't know how fast we had to go to get this.

STEVEN WATSON: Amazing. It's a lot different than having a background.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Yeah, no, this was actually done.

STEVEN WATSON: Before we go on to some of these, your main period as a photographer at *Harper's Bazaar* was about 1949 to '55—something like that. Eric said that's roughly—and not that you stopped photographing for them, but it was not as regular.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Well, let's see. Brodovitch left the *Bazaar*. I don't know the day he was let go. I don't remember exactly. He was no longer there. Henry Wolf was the art director. Henry and I didn't understand each other at all. Anytime there was a meeting of photographers and art directors and so on, Henry was on one side. I was on the other. I was always fighting with him. We never agreed on anything. But he was the art director at the *Bazaar*. I did one or two sittings. They were total disasters for me. They had none of—are you all right?

[Audio break.]

STEVEN WATSON: So they were disasters for you.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I couldn't fit into his way of—I did a couple of photographs. I hope no one ever sees them. I tried and didn't succeed very well. Then after Henry—just wait, I'll think of his name in a while—came and was the art director. And I began to feel normal. I felt like I could respond to him. He could respond to me.

But he only lasted two—I think maybe two months, three months. And there was some kind of crisis with the magazine. I don't remember what it was about. And he left, and his two assistants remained in place. And Mrs. Snow was gone by that time. Nancy White was the editor. And she was frantically, frantically looking for an art director all over Europe, you know. I think they felt that the godsend would come from—anyway, she was having trouble finding somebody.

And her two assistants were there. And I said to her, "Look, Nancy, they're doing a great job. Why don't you just stop looking and give them a chance?" You never get thanked for doing anybody a favor. The girls took over. And they—immediately, Bea [Feitler] was from South America. Ruth [Ansel] was like a Bronx girl but, you know, a very strong art director. But Bea came from another culture. And they began to draw very heavily on the new European photographers like Toscani.

STEVEN WATSON: Any others you can name?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I only remember Toscani at the moment. And they basically were not interested in me at all as a photographer. Their whole vision was new-wave European kind of photography, which is then why I moved out of it, really. I did one job for them that they were very unhappy with, and I certainly was not happy with it.

And I realized that I didn't understand them and they didn't understand me. And I appreciated what they were finding in Europe and finding out there, but I realized that my days as a *Harper's Bazaar* photographer were over. There was a new generation, a new view, a new kind of photography.

And by then, I was old hat, you know. And I think every generation has to bring in their own, and they did. And so I retired to my studio, and I did a great deal of advertising work. I developed certain campaigns that I was happy with and worked with. I also settled into commercially doing a very run-of-the-mill job for a department store, which gave me a lot of money, a lot of ability to do my own thing. But I was certainly not doing any editorial work at that point.

STEVEN WATSON: Can you name the department store?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: A&S.

STEVEN WATSON: A&S, okay. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LILLIAN BASSMAN: They were a good, substantial client. You know, I didn't have to work very hard. I had a constant revenue. I had time to work on other projects.

STEVEN WATSON: How does this coincide with the birth of your son and your daughter and the demands of being a parent?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Well, by then the children were pretty well grown.

STEVEN WATSON: They were pretty well grown by that time?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I think Eric was in Boston. I'm not sure what the time period was.

STEVEN WATSON: I think Eric was born about 1951, something like that—when you're still very actively photographing. At that time, did you have someone for childcare?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Oh, from the day they were born we had—I think Eric was seven days old when Louise came. And she stayed until he was over 16. So she was always part of the household.

STEVEN WATSON: Now, there's a point where Paul becomes much less interested in photographing.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: To put it very mildly.

STEVEN WATSON: To put it mildly.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Very mildly.

STEVEN WATSON: So I would like to hear as much of that story as you can tell.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: As possible?

STEVEN WATSON: Yeah.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Paul became an alcoholic. We went to AA. We went to therapists. We did the whole bit. I don't know how long a period it was. We went to Presbyterian—you know, all kinds of programs. Therapy didn't work. Nothing worked. He had a complete breakdown and landed at a place called Chit Chat. And they put him together.

STEVEN WATSON: This was an inpatient place?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Yeah.

STEVEN WATSON: In New York City?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: No, outside of New York. It was a program. I don't know how much we went through till he got there. He got into this program. I remember they—at that time, they asked me what Paul would like, and I said he loved the trees, the outdoors. And he said, "How could you do this to me? They sent me out there cutting, you know—doing all this physical work."

Anyway, Chit Chat was a godsend. Since that point until he died at the age of 90-something, he never had a drink. He was completely, completely straightened out at this place. It wasn't easy. I think he had a tough time. But he went through the whole program and came out of it determined to change his life completely. He gave up photography. He joined a group at the hospital on 101st Street—a group of schizophrenics in which he worked with a therapist called Martha Freeman.

And he went back to school, got another degree, became a psychotherapist and did the whole turnaround. Till the day he died, he never had a drink. So it all worked, you know. But it was a long haul to find the right cure or the right—but he did it and changed his life completely, got another master's, got top grades, was cited for some kind of an award for that. And I think, you know, it was that organization at Chit Chat that did it.

STEVEN WATSON: And was Chit Chat specifically for alcoholics? Yes, it was. So this also marked an end—not completely—for giving up photography but for that time—or pretty much completely?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Completely.

STEVEN WATSON: Completely.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Later on, when he was in his 90s, late 80s, we would drive out to the country or wherever, and he would direct whoever was driving, whether it was an assistant or whatever, "Take this road, take that road." He did a whole body of work with bridges and—but he never picked up a camera on his own after that. It was all direction.

STEVEN WATSON: Would he do any work in the darkroom?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: No. By that time, we had computers, so we had assistants, you know. He had an assistant. I had an assistant. And he would direct his assistant to create whatever images he was interested in at the time.

STEVEN WATSON: Okay. So I want to move back to the period of disposing of many of the negatives. This was both yours and Paul's.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Well, we were downsizing. Paul was not going to be a photographer anymore. I was going to move my studio up to this floor. We were also concerned a little bit about money. I mean, there was only my income. So we decided to—well, for me to come upstairs. I would have this floor. Paul was going to school at that time. We were renting out the downstairs, our joint studio and the basement.

And that's when we rented the place to Helen Frankenthaler because she was going to paint downstairs and have her equipment and stuff in the basement. And we were moving—or we emptied out, you know—we had, had a—or the whole basement was ours. And all the props and all the equipment were down in the back. And we cleared out everything. And I was going to be up here, and my darkroom was up on the next floor.

STEVEN WATSON: So on the third floor.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: On the third floor. And Paul was going off to wherever he was going. And we were disposing of our negatives and, you know, tossing out as much stuff as we could get rid of. I mean, he saved his ballet, you know, and a few things. And I threw out all the advertising stuff that I had done.

And I had one bag of, I guess, things that I thought I would preserve and put them in a black bag. And we had, at that time—I mean, back in the studio, there was a room that we didn't realize was a damp room. And we put all my negatives that I was keeping in that room, and a few of Paul's, and the rest of the stuff we just tossed—threw it out.

Years later, Helen's assistant was clearing out space and she said, "You have a bag of negatives. Would you like them?" And I said, "Sure." And I forgot about them and put them under the—just a bag—put them under the—upstairs under the—wash things. And it wasn't until—I guess it was Martin Harrison who found this bag and said, "You've got to do something with it." So some of it was preserved. A lot of it was, you know, rotted away. But I managed to keep some of the stuff.

STEVEN WATSON: So rotted away by water damage?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Oh, yeah. You know, that room that was supposed to be a storeroom was really a wet room. Everything was dank and damp and messed up.

STEVEN WATSON: At that time, did you feel regret—I mean, when you were first disposing of things—did you feel regret about what you were giving away, throwing away? Or did it just feel like, this is commercial work and

—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: No, I was not heartbroken about any of it. It was all past.

STEVEN WATSON: In the case of Paul—now, we're talking about the same time—so at this point, Paul was no longer a photographer and will probably not be one. He had a lot of commercial work and some very striking editorials—the dance stuff. I want to know what things he wanted to keep. I mean, the Grand Central pictures?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: That's all. Grand Central, the dance. I don't think he kept anything else.

STEVEN WATSON: The circus?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Yeah, I guess. The things that he did in Brodovitch's class he kept because that was not commercial work. That was all stuff that was done—you know, in excitement. Yeah, he kept that.

STEVEN WATSON: So I'm looking at some 1954-and-after, very abstract nudes by Paul. Anything you want to say about these? I mean, was this the result of Brodovitch's class?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I would imagine so. You know, he was interested in the work that he did that was not—[coughs]—was this before he gave up photography completely?

STEVEN WATSON: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LILLIAN BASSMAN: It was work that he did on his own that had nothing to do with any—he just couldn't manage the business, really, of photography. It was not him. I can make little compromises. They weren't really compromises for me. It was sort of a natural environment for me. I didn't fight it. I didn't have to drink six martinis to get into the next shot.

STEVEN WATSON: These—and I say, we're looking at—I don't know how you would describe these. They're very abstracted nudes of women. I'm guessing most of this was done in the darkroom.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: No.

STEVEN WATSON: Describe anything you can about this. We're looking at page 261 and thereafter of the Himmel and Bassman book.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Paul didn't do any of this work in the darkroom. It was all done photographically by making the lights in the background stronger than the light in the foreground, you know, by using a focus or—I don't know how he arrived at it. I can only guess. Very hot lights in the back, practically no light in the foreground, a matter of focus.

STEVEN WATSON: So it's not well-focused. Or I mean, it's well-focused for what it is, but—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Right, but it's—they had—[inaudible]—from the very strong background. And I guess the depth of field that he used—you know, whatever physical means he used to approach that and then develop it in, I guess, paper development, whatever.

STEVEN WATSON: Did these look like anything that you were aware of at the time?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: No. No, they were completely his.

STEVEN WATSON: And the fact that we're seeing them here, does that mean he saved these negatives, as well?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I would imagine so.

STEVEN WATSON: Okay. Now, for you, the downsizing of the negatives was not a very sentimental thing. With Paul, does this come at the same time of his drinking, or is it—we're really talking—this comes after his drinking? Because he's going to school at this point.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: You know, I think even when he was drinking, he had lucid days. He didn't drink 24 hours a day. I don't remember when or how we arrived at it.

STEVEN WATSON: Was he doing photography that he was interested in at that point, or was it—no? It was really, he was doing commercial photography and—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: No, not doing it.

STEVEN WATSON: Oh, not doing it, exactly. Exactly. Now, you know, the studio and home that we are in today—it looks extremely grand. [They laugh.] I mean, just to be specific, we're in an old carriage house at 117 East 83rd St. Next door, the basement and the first floor is 117-and-a-half. Can you describe what this was when you

moved in and when, if you can remember?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Well—

[Audio break.]

STEVEN WATSON: Okay, I think we have about 15 minutes. Okay, so—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: At that point, Paul had an assistant who had a friend in the real estate business. And he was told that there was a building that was coming up for sale in the spring. And he couldn't show us the building inside, but we saw the outside. And Paul and I stood there, peering into the decoration room. And we couldn't see anything, really. I'm trying to think how this happened. We were told that the building—and we kept looking in the windows and, you know, it's this wide and that deep. And we could have a studio.

We had no idea what the inside looked like. But the real estate agent said that it was coming on the market in five days or so. And we had no idea how we would do this or why we would do it, but we kept looking in and saying, "If we can afford it, we're going to get it." And it came on the market for not very much money, I guess, at the time. No one knew quite what a carriage house meant or what could be done about it. And it wasn't an exorbitant price.

So sight unseen, really, we bought it. We had an idea that, you know, there had been a car in the garage but that's about all. We didn't have a variance to work in it. We had none of the things that you're supposed to know about real estate. But we bought it pretty much outright. And then the gates opened up, and we saw that it was lots of different rooms, carriage space, vast rooms, high ceilings.

The chauffeur for the cars that had been parked there lived upstairs on this floor. He had what is now the kitchen as his living quarters. There was a skylight—no, there was no skylight at that point. There was an empty —[inaudible]. Well, we got an architect, cut down the wall through the kitchen, whatever, built the skylight. We had fun. We did things that Lizzie still chides me for doing because the cabinets are too high and this is too low or whatever.

We emptied out—there was a storage room for the hay for the horses. And a skylight went down to the studio, but it didn't give any real light. You know, there was just enough so that the horses didn't stumble. So we put a floor over that section, and we did all the things that you see now—taking out the partitions that went around the shaft that went down to the horses. So we worked with the architect, and we made mistakes, but I think we did a pretty good job.

STEVEN WATSON: Yeah, you know, I think this place is amazing. You know, a little later, it was still adventurous to buy a loft and make things. I'm wondering at the time when you bought this, was it unusual to buy a carriage house for a photography studio?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Well, I think so. We tried getting lofts. There were none of those—none of it was right for us until we settled on this. You know, it was adventurous. First of all, we didn't have legal right for anything that we were doing. Finally, I remember, we were trying to make this right for a photographic studio and the neighbors on Park Avenue objected.

And I remember the judge saying something about, "Would you rather have pretty girls walking down the street"—I don't know. I don't remember exactly what happened. But we had to wait a year to get a variance to work in the studio. In the meantime, we were still photographing in the old place and, you know, waiting for it to be torn down and waiting for this to happen.

STEVEN WATSON: Do you remember roughly how much it cost?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Fifty-five [thousand dollars].

STEVEN WATSON: Fifty-five thousand [dollars]? And this is about what year?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I don't know. I don't know years.

STEVEN WATSON: So it's maybe—well, I'll find out, and Eric will know. Okay, I think that's a good point to stop.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: At the money. Stop at the money. [They laugh.]

STEVEN WATSON: And I think, probably, the final session—I'll turn it off—will be—

[END OF AUDIO TRACK AAA_bassma11_1132.]

[AUDIO TRACK AAA_bassma11_1133 is a test track.]

STEVEN WATSON: This is Steven Watson and Lillian Bassman, November 16, 2011.

So, Lillian, today in a way we're going beyond a lot of what I know in terms of history. I would say we're going to focus on your—you know, the new part of your phase when you began with the still lifes and—of vegetables and fruits.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Right, that's right—I forgot about that. [Laughs.]

STEVEN WATSON: What?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I forgot about that.

STEVEN WATSON: Oh, well, there, in fact, it kind of been trying, to put it there. Okay? [Talking about mic placement -Ed.]

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Okay.

STEVEN WATSON: And also, briefly, when you worked with making fashion, not photographing it, because I think there's kind of a period where you're stocking a lot of the commercial—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Right.

STEVEN WATSON: —stuff.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Right.

STEVEN WATSON: And then you begin working with a woman who was more the business side.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Right.

STEVEN WATSON: So don't worry about dates—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Of course.

STEVEN WATSON: —you know, but tell me how you moved from photographing to actually making clothes.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Well, I always made my own clothing. Any time I had to go to a ball or go out or—I made something for myself. Working, I wore blue jeans and, you know—but going out, I always made clothing for myself. And—don't remember how it—exactly how it happened, but I began to make a blouse that I envisioned as a blouse that became a dress that became a gown, and I designed this with an elastic that could—and it was flowing, soft.

I don't remember how exactly it happened, but someone at the—at the fashion guild, I guess it was, the fashion organization, saw it. And it became sort of a talking piece. And it was quite elegant. It was very soft and behaved very well. It was on an elastic, and it could do all the three things it was supposed to do, and—

STEVEN WATSON: What are the three things?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Well, it could be a long dress; it could—if you brought it up, it could be up to the knees and become a street dress, and if you brought it up to your waist, it became a blouse. And I don't know what it was called at that time, the fashion guild or whatever it was, saw it and made a big thing about it. And I decided to go into production on it. And we—I brought it to—at that time it was—I forgot the store, a very elegant store, and they—

STEVEN WATSON: Not Bloomingdale's?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: No.

STEVEN WATSON: Not Bergdorf's? Not Saks? You'll remember later.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: It was on 57th Street. Oh, I'll think of it. It was a—you know, the elegant shop at that point. And they decided to produce it, so. It didn't last very long. I mean, the—their production company was not as excited as the president was, and so on. But they made the first go-around. And it had a minor success. You know, all the best stores carried it, Bergdorf's, you know, and so on.

STEVEN WATSON: Did you do—produce this in different colors?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Oh, yeah, different fabrics.

STEVEN WATSON: Different fabrics and different colors?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Yeah, but I—but I was really too much of a novice for this, because I went to places where—first of all, where I didn't have the first say along the production line. You know, people like, you know, the better designers had them. So I was always a little late. But anyway, it was a learning experience, and for a while it was amusing. And for a while I suffered through going to 7th Avenue and finding fabrics.

And I remember once finding a fabric that I loved, to discover that—wondering—I can't think of his name. Dean [ph]—one of the designers that I loved had ordered the same fabric, and since he ordered hundreds of yards and I—[laughs]—ordered little bits of yards, he got delivery first, and so I was always last. [Laughs.]

Anyway, as a small business, it was successful for a while, and then it became a total nuisance. You know, with—the fun was in designing, not in being an entrepreneur, which I was not. And the woman that I worked—was working with was the kind who got up to work at 1:00, and by the time she got to the—to her business part of it, 7:30. [Laughs.] It would be closed down.

Anyway, it didn't work. You know, we didn't lose any money. I had quite a following. I had stores all over America. But it was—you know, I had designed the stuff, and I didn't want to run the business. So that was the end of that, thank goodness.

STEVEN WATSON: Can you say the name of the woman you worked with?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Harriet Romaine [ph].

STEVEN WATSON: Harriet Romaine [ph].

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Romaine [ph]. And the clothing was under my name, Lillian Bassman.

STEVEN WATSON: And it was called Lillian Bassman Fashion, or Lillian Bassman—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Just Lillian Bassman.

STEVEN WATSON: That's it, okay.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Anyway, that—luckily, that ended.

STEVEN WATSON: Was there anything interesting about your working on, in a sense, the other side? You had photographed fashion.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Ah, it was—it was a bad experience, you know, working with shops, you know, and deliveries late, all the nuisances that if you're really serious about being a businesswoman, you can cope with. I was not, you know. I had had my time with it, and I was through, finished—happily.

STEVEN WATSON: Got it.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I went back cheerfully to doing my work, which I considered my work.

STEVEN WATSON: Now—and I think this is a time of transition for you, where you're not working so much for ANS [ph], you're doing, you know, what I'll call the still lifes.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Yeah.

STEVEN WATSON: And color. Weren't the still lifes mostly color?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Oh, yeah.

STEVEN WATSON: So to me, this looks like a big change. So I—you know, anything you say about this—and I know they were exhibited at Stentley [ph].

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Yeah.

STEVEN WATSON: But anything—I'd like to know about the process of your making this change.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Well, I guess I had worked quite a lot with still life, especially since I was working with ANS [ph] and people like that. And I began to—I think, to get more interested in color, having been a still-life photographer for so long and a fashion photographer. And it began to seem natural to start working with objects

that had color, making my own color by using ribbons and pieces of fabric and so on and making color palettes with that.

But when I—I'm trying to think—when I—when I did the Stenthley [ph] show, I was working with Mylar backgrounds and doing mostly fruits and—not flowers, fruits and vegetables and things, using ribbons and pieces of fabric and—well, I guess, mostly pieces of colored fabrics for backgrounds that I distorted in Mylar so that it became like—not quite an abstract background, but not obtrusively—I mean, you couldn't tell that they were ribbons. You couldn't—I mean, they were diffused in the Mylar.

And so the Stenthley [ph] show was mostly of fruits and vegetables with the background of the Mylar with the colored fabrics and ribbons in the back. So that was that exhibition, and—

STEVEN WATSON: Before you move ahead, from what I've seen, the colors were very intense.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Yeah.

STEVEN WATSON: Was that by your choice of backgrounds or something about the developing?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: No, it's just all—I guess ectochrome? I don't remember what film. It wasn't Kodachrome, but something like ectochrome. I think it was the Mylar that helped me, and it was tabletop under my skylight. It was the Mylar that intensified certain—you know, the reflections in the—anyway, it was all purely experimental. I hadn't seen anybody work that way. It was—I don't know, I always liked Mylar. I liked the reflections. I liked the shafts of light, you know. And this was all tabletop, you know, in the—under the skylight in the studio. So I worked that way for quite some time, and then of course developed into something else, you know.

STEVEN WATSON: Okay. The other thing about this is I think your prints were very large.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Yeah.

STEVEN WATSON: And I think that was—we're talking roughly 1978. I don't know, we'll correct it later. But I don't think there were so many really large prints at that time.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I—you know, at that period—and most of my background wasn't in touch with other photographers or other—it was purely by concentration, by experimentation. And I found a lab that would make these prints, and they still exist. That was it. You know, I've always sort of—I can't remember a time when I haven't experimented with some new thought, new development, new size, new background material that would—at one point I was photographing into Mylar and getting this kind of—like a painterly look. Didn't last too long. I mean—

STEVEN WATSON: Say it again?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I didn't last too long doing this, but it was one of the phases that I went through in which I did a lot of portraits of friends, of—not models, you know, my assistant. And then I moved on to something else. I don't remember what it was. But I find that I go through maybe two or three years of doing something and then finding something else that makes me move on and experiment with something else.

STEVEN WATSON: Number one, I think that's great. Number two, how—is there anything you can say about how you know when it's time to move on to something new? Because I don't think it's based on commercial reasons.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: No, never. No. I think it's when another thought presents itself, and I change.

STEVEN WATSON: So the Stenthley [ph] show, were there buyers? I mean, photography is always very iffy.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Not too much. Not too much. Some of the pieces sold, but it wasn't a huge success.

STEVEN WATSON: Do you remember the name of the studio that did these large prints?

MS .BASSMAN: At the Stenthley [ph] show?

STEVEN WATSON: Yeah. If not, we'll remember later.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: We'll remember later, because I love those—that guy—he was great—that I worked with on that.

STEVEN WATSON: The printer?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Yeah.

STEVEN WATSON: The guy who did the prints. Uh-huh [affirmative.] Why was he great?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Because he understood what I wanted, and he was amusing.

STEVEN WATSON: Amusing?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Yeah. And we got along very well, I think mostly because he appreciated what I was trying to do and did a great deal to help me technically, you know, get what I wanted. Can't think of his name now.

STEVEN WATSON: Because—well, it'll come back. But this is maybe one of the early times when you're not in control of printing.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Oh, not at all, no.

STEVEN WATSON: Not at all in control.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: No. Well, I'm in control, but not when I'm physically involved.

STEVEN WATSON: I mean, you depended on him to do the printing, in terms of color.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Yep.

STEVEN WATSON: And—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Right.

STEVEN WATSON: That's quite different from when you'd printed things on your own.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Oh, really, yeah. No, I—no, I couldn't be in the darkroom and muss around with the—I mean, this was the first time it was a finished product that went to a lab where my fingers were not in the pie.

STEVEN WATSON: How was it for you to have to give up that darkroom control?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: It was okay because I could control the—I was never out of control. I was just—not hands-on control. But I was not in the darkroom and not mushing and playing and shifting and—you know, this was—had to be done in the camera, and that was it. What was in the camera was what. So the darkroom was gone, gone completely, never to appear again.

Oh, yes, that's not true. I never went back to printing in the darkroom, but to making my own cibachrome prints, you know, rolling out the—I remember using the darkroom upstairs with a dry canister, not all the water and the—and rolling the canister to develop the thing. But it was all—all the development happened within the canister and not in the trays that I used to use. So by rolling the canister, you develop the print. So then I had prints.

STEVEN WATSON: But they're not darkroom-created.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: They're not—darkroom created, no. This is in a—in a, you know, more—something that controlled me, not—you know.

STEVEN WATSON: So I am thinking that one of the next things you did was the muscle men, after the fruits and vegetables.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Right. Well—

STEVEN WATSON: And I know you did the cracks and—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I did a lot of—I did a lot of photographing people within the—this Mylar thing, and then—and then there were the cracks, when I—I remember walking through the street, through the—you know, crossing the sidewalks and always looking down and seeing images in the cracks and becoming fascinated by them. And so I said, "I'm going to photograph them."

And my poor assistant just would go crazy because I would stand in the middle of the street, you know, with the cars and—rushing around. And he was always terrified that something would happen, but it all worked out all right. I actually documented what I was doing at that point, like I'd take photographs on Park Avenue between 80th Street and 83rd Street, and then I'd go down to Broadway and shoot something down there, and—why I am telling you this? [Laughs.]

STEVEN WATSON: Oh, because I asked—I asked about your—you know, what you were doing next and the cracks.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Yeah, so I did that, stood in the middle of the street, let the cars move whichever way they wanted to as long as they didn't move into me. And then what was the next project? I'm trying to think.

STEVEN WATSON: Well, so one question about that. So in a way this is almost—it's completely concrete, and it's also quite abstract.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Very abstract, yeah, except that I always saw things within the abstract. That still—sort of resonate with me, I guess. I don't know how long I did that. You know, I did it till I achieved what I wanted to achieve with them. And—

STEVEN WATSON: So you saw more than patterns?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Oh, I had whole dialogues going on in my head. You know, they weren't just patterns, they were stories. And they had—they had more meaning for me than just patterns. If they were just patterns, I could have drawn them myself. But they were things that I saw within these images that I looked at. So that was another phase. I don't remember what I went on to from there.

STEVEN WATSON: Well, I think, you know, we're talking about the Mylar and the—and the muscle men.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Oh. Well, the muscle men came about in a very funny way.

STEVEN WATSON: Oh, tell me.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Well, you know, we lived at Fire Island. And I used to sit on the beach and watch people come in out of the water. And suddenly it struck me that these men that came out of the water had—what do you—pectorals—

STEVEN WATSON: Pectorals.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: —that to me were like hermaphrodites. They were men and women. And I began to see it that way. I mean, it didn't occur to me—and, I'll, you know, only after watching a group come in, it suddenly came to me that these muscles were like breasts, you know. And so, I don't know, I became fascinated with the image. And then I guess from there, I got to the—to the muscle men.

STEVEN WATSON: Do you think it's—I don't want to put words in your mouth, but—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: No, put it out.

STEVEN WATSON: Do you think it's right to say that the whole bodybuilding thing became more widespread around that time? And we're talking roughly 1980. Or do you think it's just suddenly your eyes were attuned?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I had experienced the muscle-men thing. Paul and Dick and I went to one of these exhibitions of—what do you call it?

STEVEN WATSON: Physique?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Yeah, you know. And I mean, Doe was with us. And the two of us, Doe and myself, stood on the chairs, and we were screaming, "Show us the muscle that made you famous." [They laugh.] Anyway, it was quite a—you know—have you ever been to one of those shows?

STEVEN WATSON: Yes.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Right. I guess it was early on for Doe and myself, but I never forgot it, you know, the way in which they shouldered, up and the muscles began to creep up. Anyway—and we were screaming, "Show us the pose that made you famous," you know, and all that. Anyway, I think I always was sort of aware of that.

STEVEN WATSON: Lillian, I'm curious, you know, whether this looked like sculpture, whether it looked grotesque, whether it looked sexual. You know, how did it look to your eyes? Especially—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Never sexual. As a matter of fact, I found it kind of a little repulsive. My idea of male beauty was not that. It was sort of, you know, slim, wasn't—I found that kind of—on the other hand, I must have been kind of fascinated by it. It wasn't a—it wasn't a sexual thing. It was kind of an amazement of how a body could become distorted. So I became interested. And I got—I went to these magazine stores and bought muscle magazines. And then I would take one that I thought was appropriate for my use, cut it out, fold it, twist it, put it in the front of the Mylar and use the reflection to make an image.

So I developed this group of photographs of muscle men, and people used to tease me about it, you know. "So

how many of these guys did you bring into the studio?" [Laughs.] And I couldn't say, "Ah, you know, I brought them all from the magazine shop." [They laugh.] You know, the magazine people used to be very curious about why this woman of—how old was I? I don't remember—buying muscle magazines. Why was I interested in them? But I bought quite a few, you know, because they had to be photographed in some way that I could minimize what they were wearing or—you know, I managed to—by twisting and turning and distorting, to make my own muscle men.

STEVEN WATSON: You know, I'm also wondering—I think it's relatively new at that time for a photographer to be photographing photographs and changing them.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Right.

STEVEN WATSON: I mean, it—I'm not saying you're the first person, but in your own mind.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: In my own mind, I was doing—it came naturally to me. I didn't—I never really followed the—what other photographers were doing. I didn't really know. Maybe I should've, but I didn't. I did what I could to achieve the kind of looks that I wanted and the gesture that I wanted.

And then, because I was always interested in silk screening, I made silkscreens and—like, made a table in the studio in which I actually did the silkscreens. And I think, in a way—and I'd made the screens, the silkscreens of the muslin, and I still think that, in some way, the ones that I did on paper and not photographically but—are maybe a little more successful, like—they're not more—they're—I guess they're like drawings that I love. They're not photography anymore, but, you know.

STEVEN WATSON: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. So in a way, it's taking photography, distorting it one way, distorting it a second way, changing a third way by silk screening and coming out with—am I saying that all right?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: No, no, you're right.

STEVEN WATSON: So now I want to move to Martin Harrison because I think that's the big, big thing.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Sure. Yeah.

STEVEN WATSON: So tell me, tell me the story about, you know, how he came to you. And I'll ask questions, but I'd like you to just tell it your own way.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Well, Martin was doing the book, and we got—we got to be friendly, I guess.

STEVEN WATSON: And this was a book about—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Oh, everybody's fashion. And he used two photographs of mine. And we got to be friendly. And I had an extra room upstairs; you know, maybe it was Lizzie's room, maybe it was Eric's room. And he was coming from London and working here, and I must have said, you know, "I have this room upstairs; why don't you come and stay there?"

And we became great friends, you know. He stayed and he stayed and he stayed, and every year he would come back and his clothing would be in the closet and his shoes would be on the floor. It came to be sort of ritual, you know. Every year he would come for a while and stay and work on his projects and so on.

Why did we start this about?

STEVEN WATSON: Well, because—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: He started with this book on fashion and he used, I think, two or three of my photographs in it. And so we developed a very long friendship which exists still today, you know.

STEVEN WATSON: And he saw some of your negatives?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Yes, he was—he was upstairs in my dark room. I don't know—remember what I was doing up there. And he came up and happened to look under the table, and discovered how—not—a bag of negatives that I'd completely forgotten about that had been downstairs in the—in the back of the studio when we rented it, and it was sort of all mildewed and messy, but within it there was always one or two negatives that could be resurrected and used. And I started to print them and became interested in the fashion again in the old pictures. And I don't know how this happened, how I got to the *Times* or how they got wind of what I had or what I was doing. But they came to me and I remember it was Frans Ankoné—Frans Ankoné who was the editor at the time, and he asked me if I would do a sitting. And I was really surprised, but I said, "Maybe it'd be fun?"

And so I did my—I did my first sitting for him. And so I then had the *Times* as an outlet for the fashion. And I find—and it's sort of invigorating again to be in touch with fashion. And he and I did some—we worked very well together, and we did some of the more interesting fashion that I did towards the end of—excuse me—with my fashion career. We went to Paris together and we did Times Square together. And we did some advertising together, not that I was very excited by that, but anyway.

STEVEN WATSON: Lillian, when you say, "we did this together," how would your roles be?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Well, together meant that he would choose the clothing. He would choose the model. We would talk about the ideas for what the magazine was—at that time, it was the *Times Magazine*—was doing a story on Broadway, and Frans and I decided that we would do what we nicknamed Lady Godiva on Broadway. And so we dreamt up this thing of getting a horse and having him colored white, powdered white or whatever—whatever they did to make him white. And we photographed—and I—by this time, I'm being a photographer back to using lights, to getting involved with the fashion—you know, getting involved with the choices and all—being a fashion photographer for real.

And so we—I remember one of the things we did on Broadway; we got this horse, as I said. We were going to Lady Godiva. And it was 3 o'clock in the morning, and I was running up and down the streets—overhead lights, you know, big tall lights—being very efficient and having an assistant run with me. It was amusing to see me—I don't know, what, I was in my 80s running up and down this street at 3 o'clock in the morning, corralling the horse, getting the girl to look like Lady Godiva, and the crowd's around, you know.

And then here I am, absolutely oblivious to the fact that we were in the middle of Broadway, and—in Broadway and 42nd St. in that little diamond that—but it—was very—was exactly what I wanted it to be. It was her on a white horse and the life of Broadway, so—and it was supposed to be a Broadway issue.

So anyway, I was—

STEVEN WATSON: Lillian, how did it feel to you to be a fashion photographer again? You know, just emotionally. I'm curious.

I'm going to close the door.

But, you know, most people don't get this chance.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: It felt very natural. The only problem I had with going back to photographing fashion at that point was that the models were too young. I had this one girl that I loved who is—late 20s, who understood exactly what I wanted; everything was fine.

When it came to taking assignments and she was in Europe or wherever she was, I was confronted with not my choice of model—I like—I remember this one sitting; I had this model booked who was 28 or 25, and I loved her. And I always liked working with models that I'd worked with, you know. I didn't always find it very rewarding to work with somebody new. Sometimes, yes, but not—

Anyway, I got—this one particular time, I got to this sitting. And around 8 or 9 o'clock in the morning—it was down in Tribeca in a big studio. And I came well-prepared to see this model that I liked, and it turned out that the agency had sent her to Europe. And so they substituted a girl. And I looked at the girl, which I was—she had a beautiful body—tall—not—over bosomed, but at least a body. And I looked at her face, and she was a child.

I don't know. It absolutely destroyed me to have a child. I mean, she must have been, what, 16? But a child—15. Beautiful body, beautiful face, but a child, in a gown that cost thousands of dollars. And I—I can't do this, you know? It was a disaster.

STEVEN WATSON: Did you carry through with the sitting?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I don't remember. All I know is that I was absolutely destroyed by the idea of a child wearing—I mean, they were the most expensive clothing. I don't remember what happened to the sitting.

STEVEN WATSON: Okay.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: But I think that that sort of finished me for a while. The idea of having to shoot fashion on children didn't appeal to me.

STEVEN WATSON: When you were shooting for *Harper's Bazaar*, were there ever models that were so young?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: No.

STEVEN WATSON: No.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: No.

STEVEN WATSON: So we're talking about a very different time.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Different. And I—and I still look at fashion magazines and see these young beautiful girls who look maybe like they're 18, 17, wearing these extraordinarily sumptuous outfits. And I can't look at the magazines. And, you know, I just—it just turns me off.

STEVEN WATSON: Who besides the *New York Times* would ask you to do shoots?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: German *Vogue*. I did quite a lot of work for them. American magazines paid no attention to me at all.

STEVEN WATSON: American—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: And nobody—nobody ever asked me, and I didn't have an agent who would go and solicit work. German *Vogue* was very interested in me. I did quite a lot of work for them.

STEVEN WATSON: And would you shoot for them in this country or in Germany?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I think in this country. But the editor understood me and found models that were not children and didn't go to, you know, these—

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LILLIAN BASSMAN: [In progress]—the runway, the—not the runway, but the normal, you know, the ones that the fashion magazines made.

STEVEN WATSON: Got it.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: She found models that were more European types only.

STEVEN WATSON: Got it, got it. So I want to return to Martin Harrison because I think he helped you get reinterested in your old negatives.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Right, right.

STEVEN WATSON: How did you—first of all, like about what percentage of what you found were usable?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: [Laughs.]

STEVEN WATSON: You know, are we talking 10—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Two percent.

STEVEN WATSON: Two percent. Really?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Now that—now that I have a computer, things are different. I can find more and be able to restore and change and use those negatives that I couldn't use at that time. But with the computer, I can—

STEVEN WATSON: Yeah. So I'm going to come to the computer later. When you found these with Martin, what—how did you work with them? The—in a similar way that you would have originally, or—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I don't remember.

STEVEN WATSON: Okay.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I don't remember working with them, or just living with them and thinking about them. I don't think I printed them at that time.

STEVEN WATSON: Okay. So you mostly began working with printing and—when you got interested in the computer?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Yeah.

STEVEN WATSON: Okay.

STEVEN WATSON: Now, Lizzie said that was the second year of Sprout's time at Swarthmore, that she left a computer here, and you began to learn about it.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: [Laughs.]

STEVEN WATSON: That would have been about 13 years ago.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I don't remember how that all happened, but Lizzie remembers.

STEVEN WATSON: Yeah. But—so, we're talking a number of years. Now, did you begin working with an assistant to help you think about how to work with the computer and the negatives?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Oh, yeah, I had an assistant at that time. Well, the assistant was there for technical reasons to transfer the image to the computer. The rest of it was using the computer like a palette, you know—or not a palette, but to draw—to work on images that I had. It's always been that the assistant role was to transfer the image to the screen and then to leave me alone. I mean, when I got into trouble, he was there, but it was a matter of—it was like drawing, you know, being able to isolate the parts that I wanted, to change the parts that I didn't want, to intensify. I taught myself all that. I mean, he was there to help me if I ran into trouble, you know, but all of it was a matter of, I guess, drawing.

STEVEN WATSON: Can you say some of the programs you would use? I mean, was it Photoshop primarily or—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Only. Only.

STEVEN WATSON: Only Photoshop? Okay.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Only Photoshop.

STEVEN WATSON: Okay, okay.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: You know, with the—with the board, you know, being able to make the lines thicker or thinner or draw, isolate—I don't know how I taught myself this. I did. I mean, I just applied myself to it. Steve was there to check me if I got into trouble, if I—but mostly it was learning what the various bars said, you know, how to make it more contrasting, how to add more of this, change that. And I developed my own methods of doing all of this, and as I say, it—it was all pretty accurate. You know, Steve was always there to get me out of trouble if I did—if I was in trouble. But the images were mine, the contrasts were mine, the ability to add or subtract from the image was mine, to add clouds, you know, whatever I wanted—not that I added clouds—but, you know, to change backgrounds, to—and so I taught myself pretty proficiently how to use the computer. And to this day, you know, I can compose pretty much what I want, eliminate what I want, distort what I want. I learned all the tricks of how to elongate a figure, how to mash it, you know. So I'm pretty adept at the computer. I'm very savvy with it.

STEVEN WATSON: Got it. Now, I don't know—this is a big question—but the way you look at those old negatives now and how you work with them, do you feel your vision has changed much from the original time when you were in the darkroom? Or—take that question wherever you want to.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I don't think so, no. It all depends on what my project is at the moment. Like right now, I'm doing mood—nudes—

STEVEN WATSON: Okay.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: —but with a very strong—I don't know how to describe it—a very stylized, I think, very beautiful—completely abstracted from what these nudes were originally. We'll see. I'm working on it now.

STEVEN WATSON: Ah.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I think they're very beautiful. They're very "poster-ly"; they're very sensual. We'll see.

STEVEN WATSON: And these nudes you're working on now, the negatives come from when? Roughly, roughly.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: 15 years ago, when—or 20 years ago, when I—

STEVEN WATSON: Okay.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: —I was shooting nudes. For what reason, I don't remember; but—and the prints that I did at that time or maybe it's the choices I chose from the sittings—they're totally different, totally different. One is very fluid, very—I can't imagine. They were—they were nudes of this girl taking a bath, I would say, within the

same year. They're completely, completely different.

STEVEN WATSON: Fascinating.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I don't know—the prints that I made then were very sensual and quite beautiful. These are dynamic in a different way. I mean, you would never imagine that they came from the same sitting. It's a matter of how I interpret it on a screen, and that's a lot of fun.

STEVEN WATSON: I bet.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I'm having a very good time.

STEVEN WATSON: What can you say about what your work life is now?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Now?

STEVEN WATSON: Now. I mean, you're 94 years old.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I'm 94 years old.

STEVEN WATSON: So, yeah, tell me what you—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I sleep or don't sleep. I don't—after getting washed and cleaned up and dressed and everything, say, it gets to be around 12, 1:00. Generally, because you're not here, I go into the studio at about 1, 1:30. I go to the computer, I work for about three or four hours—three hours, I would say. I then go to my favorite chair. I sit and have lunch. And I might, you know, have a meeting, do something. Then I go back to the computer and—well, take for instance yesterday. I went—after lunch, which was around 3 or 4:00, I went back to the computer and worked till 8:30. I don't often work that late. I usually stop at around 6, but I don't know what happened yesterday. Shanay [ph], the girl who works here, went home, and I may have eaten later than usual. Anyway, I went back to the computer and worked late.

STEVEN WATSON: So there's two big chunks of time every day.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I would say, on the average, I work about six hours a day. It's not eight hours, and it's not 12, but I do—I do about that much.

STEVEN WATSON: For example, yesterday, were you working primarily on one image or—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Yeah.

STEVEN WATSON: One image.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Well, I'm having trouble. [Laughs.] So I went back, I stopped for a while, I had lunch—a late lunch—and I went back, and I worked till around—I think it was 8 something.

I love working, you know; it's no hardship. I stop because it's time to eat, and I do get, you know, normally tired—not exhausted. But I don't start that early in the morning, because that's the time when everybody pays attention to my body.

STEVEN WATSON: Okay. Got it, got it. Well, you know, speaking about paying attention, you know, you were paid attention to many, many years ago as a fashion photographer. Now, you're paid attention to also as a quote—in the quote, unquote, "art world," and I'm curious what that's like for you.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: I never felt accepted as a fashion photographer as I do now as a photographer. I always felt that I was, you know, not in the first league, not accepted that way. I feel much more accepted now. You got to be 94. [Laughs.] Yeah, I feel much more recognition than I ever felt before. I never really felt that kind of acceptance as a fashion photographer. I always felt sort of like, you know, "yeah, you're okay," you know. Now, I've been made to feel a little more special.

STEVEN WATSON: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm [affirmative]. Now, you—your primary gallery in New York is—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Staley-Wise.

STEVEN WATSON: Staley-Wise. Do you have—roughly, how many shows have you had there?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Ten? I don't know.

STEVEN WATSON: Okay, okay. And can you say some of the other places that—where you've been shown in the

last, you know, few years?

LILLIAN BASSMAN: You'd have to ask Lizzie that.

STEVEN WATSON: I mean, I think FIT—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Oh, yeah.

STEVEN WATSON: And the gallery in Germany, the show that you—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: The big show.

STEVEN WATSON: The big show with you and Paul.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Right. The gallery in Munich.

STEVEN WATSON: Okay. We can get that from Lizzie.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Yeah.

STEVEN WATSON: You know, I guess I'm—and I think we're soon going to wind up, but, you know, any—I don't know—any thoughts or—you have on looking back from your perspective now or how you're—how you're feeling now, because most of us don't have the chance to have a perspective from 94 years, and 94 really exciting periods that you were in.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Right. Well, the thing that—that I most appreciate is that I never really got stuck in a morass—is that the word?

STEVEN WATSON: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LILLIAN BASSMAN: —in a specific style or situation, that I was always willing to go—to try, always, to find some new way of expressing myself, instead of doing the same thing day in and day out and day in, day out. Certainly the periods didn't change every two months, but I think they—the thing that I appreciate most about myself is the ability to change and to explore and to find a new way of expressing my sort of vision, my—I'm not painting the same line drawing week after week after year after year after year.

STEVEN WATSON: Yeah. That may be a perfect end point. What—

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Was it okay?

STEVEN WATSON: I think it's wonderful.

LILLIAN BASSMAN: Okay.

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]