



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Peter Dechar,
1965 September 6

Funding for the digital preservation of this interview was provided by a grant from the Save America's Treasures Program of the National Park Service.

Contact Information

Reference Department
Archives of American Art
Smithsonian Institution
Washington, D.C. 20560
www.aaa.si.edu/askus

Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Peter Dechar on September 6, 1965. The interview took place in Provincetown, Massachusetts, and was conducted by Dorothy Seckler for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

The Archives of American Art has reviewed the transcript and has made corrections and emendations. 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

DOROTHY SECKLER: This is Dorothy Seckler interviewing Peter Dechar in Provincetown on September 6, 1965. Peter, I'll turn over the mic to you so that you can introduce yourself, your work.

PETER DECHAR: Well, I think first of all, it's very difficult for me to say why I paint, what I paint, what the paintings involve. But I can talk about my process a little bit in that way, perhaps, give a slight idea of what happens. I have a little written statement, the thing that I've been working on daily. I have a fragment here, and it's ideas that occurred to me, and I write them as I go along. My hand becomes—this is actually a transcript of what goes on in my mind. [Dechar reads.]

"I paint because I must. Nothing else is of interest. Six months ago, I would have settled for other things. Then painting was my profession, now it's my life. It's not that I'm dedicated, or in that sense committed—God knows nothing could be farther from the truth. Yet I certainly don't feel trapped, not as an artist, anyway. What is curious is that I paint without forcing myself, or on the other hand, enjoying it. I don't just go to it, either; it most certainly is not a habit. [00:02:00] In fact, I'm quite disorganized and irregular about my schedule. Days go by without my getting out of bed. And there, too, I'm not driven to staying in bed. After coffee in bed and feeling rested, mind active, I simply stay there. I have no reason not to be there, so I stay. But I don't feel like I'm in bed. I think as if I'm not in bed, but I spare myself the trouble of holding myself erect while thinking. I've noticed also that when I think out of bed, I have a desire to concentrate, in a way to focus on things. Thinking prone is somehow freer. The subject of thought is on the same level as the thinking; the two items run parallel tracks. I've noticed that I'm able to keep up with my prone thoughts more successfully than my erect thoughts. I hesitate to make any kind of value judgment. I'm always erect when I paint, although sometimes I draw in a reclining position, never prone. I usually paint on shopping days; there I'm trapped. If I don't shop, I don't eat; if I don't eat—so rather than climb back into bed, I stay erect and either look out the window, or paint. I paint because there is no reason not to paint, not out of boredom. There is no reason to be bored. To recognize boredom, I would have to recognize a better state of being; that is, better than the bored state, and I don't. Nothing is important, certainly not art, so I paint because I must, or rather, I am pushed towards it. Being in an erect position, I begin to focus, direct my eyes, as it were, concentrate my thoughts on one area. [00:04:05] I don't actually look, my mind is concentrated, that's all. Looking out the window, I notice, without really looking, people, animals, cars, trees, all things moving. Even things like houses can be seen as moving. That's it. I see movement. I don't actually see things moving, I see generalized movement. I see past and future. I see where things were, and I see where things are going to be. Going to be. The house across the street is going to be moved. The garden will be a concrete ribbon. In one year, I have been told, that big, brick house will no longer be where it is; the garden will be a highway. One day, a big truck will pull up in front, then men will jump out. The house will be jacked up and set on big boards and slid onto the big truck. Nothing will remain, except the big hole, a cement-encrusted void. But within another few days, another big truck will pull up in front of the house and two men will jump out, climb up on the back section of the truck. One will start up the bulldozer, then both men together will arrange some heavy planks, on which the bulldozer will crawl off the platform. Later on that same day, the void will disappear, and soon after, cars will be shooting back and forth over where the house is now. I can see the movement. I don't really focus my attention on any particular thing, but I am aware of movement. It's not really important movement, because I don't think about it, but I am conscious of it. The house is there now with people living in it. [00:06:03] Someone sees that it is in the way, so it will be moved; not far, just out of the way. That's the way things happen. That's why I paint. I notice an empty space that's in the way. I put an empty canvas there, and that, too, is in the way. I paint, I move, I move the paint. Soon the canvas is not in the way. I move it not because it's in the way, the space is in the way. The space is in the way of the canvas. In a way, the canvas can't get in the way, because it moves of its own accord. It stays out of the way, but the space doesn't move, the canvas moves independently of me. It is me moving in the past. I have to get it out of the way; it's me, I'm in the way. I'm in the way of myself. The canvas doesn't get in the way because it's small, thin. I have a big closet where I keep my paintings. Open the door, slip the canvas into a vacant slot, close the door, and it's gone, out of the way. That's not my real problem. My real problem is getting myself out of the way. I can't stay in a closet. I've been having the groceries delivered recently, but I'm still in the way. That's not

the thing. Soon I'll have everything delivered. I'll still get up for one reason or another, and there I am—in the way. Even lying in bed, I've recently noticed myself in the way. I feel my throat. It feels dry. I try to swallow, but I can't. I move my head—look at the floor, the ceiling, a door. I manage to swallow, wet my throat, but there I am, on a bed, which is on a floor, which is in a building. There is nothing to be done; I am there. [00:08:02] Get up, wash the dishes that have been piling up for the last month, wash the foul taste out of my mouth. Look out the window, the sun, people moving—everything is movement—moving. Movement is all around me. I am moving, I am breathing, swallowing. I study the street."

And I think that's all I'll read now. The process of writing this little fragment, I think it is similar to the process of painting. It's quite different, however, from talking to someone. I think when I talk to someone, it's my public personality coming out.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, that's all right, too, and it's marvelous, for me, at least, to have the glimpse of the private personality, and perhaps we can have some of both for a little while. We were talking last night about something, it seems to me to bear somewhat on what you were writing to your conviction that an artist painting is actually what he is living, that it is impossible, really, to make a division between what he lives and what he paints. [00:10:00] Of course you touched on that in what you just read, in the sense that you said six months ago, it was your profession. And many artists—many painters, perhaps we should say—do think of painting as a profession. But as we were considering the possibility to paint, any artist who really becomes a—or contributes something vital, is usually someone whose painting is, in some way, like his life. And I wonder, of course, might be that many—a person who didn't know your work at all, in coming in contact with your reflection is sort of introspective reverie, or self-searching that your paper reveals might wonder what it was that materialized on your canvas, or how, or the relationship between your searching and whatever it was to appear on that canvas. We've been—to bring this back to our here and now reality that we've been living for at least two months or more here in Provincetown, right on the edge of the bay with a stretch of about, oh, a city block of beach and sand in front of us, and water, seagulls, a lot of rotten old decks and rickety-looking houses, but very interesting sense of people, rather different sensibilities coming and going. [00:12:12] And of an awareness of images that sort of hover around us sometimes, the images that get onto paintings, then become a kind of coin which we sort of take for granted. We all sort of know when we think of someone like our next door neighbor, Alvin, we know these things that appear on his canvases—eggshells, or potatoes sometimes, or a few cherries. And in—and they become sort of images, so that they're sort of [inaudible]—I almost think of them as, you know, they're sort of hovering as an appendage, perhaps, to the person. And I wondered about the reality of this summer and this place, and what has come, the imagery and the forms. I would rather say "forms" than "imagery," because perhaps the imagery is this kind of a something in which the forms clothe themselves.

PETER DECHAR: I really don't know what—I don't know precisely what role the forms play, symbolically, the forms being, as you know very well, simply pears. And pears in a somewhat transformed state, an enlarged state. Some of them are a little bit fearsome, perhaps. Sometimes they're a crowd. [00:14:02] They certainly can be seen as having personalities, inasmuch as some of them are a little bit buoyant, perhaps, a little bit gay, light. Others are very heavy. But it all exists on a less than conscious level. It's not contrived in that sense. I don't mean to imply that a contrivance is necessarily bad.

DOROTHY SECKLER: No, I'm not asking you, nor perhaps should anyone, to fathom what basis in unconscious mentation or a feeling the pears may—or what sources the forms may have. It might be kind of interesting, however, to pro—well, in what way they appear to you. For instance, you could, say, discuss the pears as, well, number one, perhaps just forms, forms which tend to have within them, if we wanted to think in the old Cezanne-esque terms of a cylinder and part of a cone, I suppose [laughs]. Then we could think of them as forms that reflect and absorb and radiate light in a certain way. We could think of them as presences almost in a sense of something perhaps on a stage, because they do, in your paintings, sometimes gather together into almost a group, you know, as if they might almost be conversing, or standing, or witnessing. [00:16:13]

PETER DECHAR: Well, I think maybe what you're talking about a little bit is the formal aspect. But—

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, it might be easier to get into that than to assume that you would be able to drag out of your unconscious the richness of association. I mean, I'd love to, to any extent, we could touch on both.

PETER DECHAR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOROTHY SECKLER: Sometimes it's easier and more casual to deal with that.

PETER DECHAR: Well, perhaps I can elaborate a little bit on what I started to say, um, that if you accept these things as emotional things, in a way, as things having personality in a sense, as forms having that relationship to a human being, I think maybe you can understand a little bit the role they play in my less than conscious state, or if you wish, subconscious state, that I can adjust them. I can make them fearsome to the right degree, or

whatever, adjust them in that way. Then, the relationship of the formal aspects comes into play, um, inasmuch as if I make one form larger, and perhaps more intensely colored, that obviously is going to be the one that demands the most attention. [00:18:00] Well, what I'm really getting at is that in addition to the formal aspects that pictures may have, I think perhaps they make use, to a larger degree, than is commonly encountered in contemporary painting. Emotional, emotionality, that is, emotions as a formal element, if maybe that's not just a play on words. I don't mean it to be. But I think the fact that perhaps there's one little center of focus, which tends to be a hole, which tends to be a hiding place is more important than the fact that it's in, say, the center of the canvas.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PETER DECHAR: I think that emotional thing is more demanding than, say, an intense red might be in contrast to the overall greenish tone of the picture on the right side. I think the red would tend to go unnoticed.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. This sense of a cave-like space, or how—that was—

PETER DECHAR: Well, it's the kind of space that perhaps can be related very closely to a little area under a large tree in a Claude Lorrain landscape.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PETER DECHAR: This kind of space existed in landscape painting for hundreds of years. You can always pick out that little niche where you feel free, and where you want to go and hide.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. [00:20:00]

PETER DECHAR: Well, I think there, too, that emotional space, there was a kind of emotional tension that existed in addition to the general dynamics of the color.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. In your case, I assume this feeling of the forms being fearful, or perhaps, on the other hand, lighter and more expansive possibly, is something that you may discover in the course of the training? Or would it be clear to you from the beginning that the shapes would loom, or have this more awesome presence?

PETER DECHAR: Well, I certainly wouldn't say that I'm aware of it from the beginning. But I can say that the pattern that, or the overall quality of the picture reflects very closely my emotional state at that time. I can give you specific examples. For instance, this spring, there was a very definite break in the quality of the pictures, definite change, where from enclosing forms where, say, there would be the three large forms forming a general hollow in the canvas.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PETER DECHAR: A large space where one would want to, perhaps, relax, to a generally expansive quality, where each form had room and breathed an open quality. [00:22:07]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PETER DECHAR: I found that I was incapable of painting any more of those earlier pictures throughout the entire spring. I simply couldn't do it.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You were in a somewhat happier frame of mind, or more at ease, more—

PETER DECHAR: No, it wasn't—

DOROTHY SECKLER: It wasn't anything as explicit as that.

PETER DECHAR: No. But it had to do with, I think, a sense of freedom of thought, ah, perhaps I felt, in a way, that I was dealing with things on a more isolated level, and that I was separating things, that things, in a way, were clearer to me.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PETER DECHAR: Perhaps it could be said that the pears do reflect that in the sense that they have more individuality; each one has more of a specific character than in the earlier paintings, and at the same time, tend to expand independently of one another, rather than forming a general, or generally enclosing space.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. That's fascinating.

PETER DECHAR: The point of all this is not really to explain painting on a kind of Freudian level, but simply to talk about the relationship, the very crucial relationship of life, the inner life, of me, the painter, and what happens on the painting. And again, going back to what I read, the reason for painting, it simply must be done. It can't be done any other way. There is no good and bad. There is no ideal, where the ideal could only be stated as that which most precisely reflects my innermost needs. [00:24:07]

DOROTHY SECKLER: How did this change from the more enclosed and the more open space reflect what you did with color and tones, and so on, as far as—

PETER DECHAR: Back to there was a very definite change. The earlier paintings, which tended to enclose, were generally very warm. Tones were very warm. The background color was a very rich brown. Perhaps the simplest way to describe them would be to say they were "Rembrandt-esque"—

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PETER DECHAR: —while the later paintings had a very—or relatively cold background.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Rather silvery grays, would you say?

PETER DECHAR: Silvery grays, as opposed to rich browns.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. We haven't mentioned the color of the pears, but of course they were, I believe, all the green would have been—

PETER DECHAR: All the pears were green. The forms were green. But again, the earlier paintings reflect—they were very warm greens.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes, they were. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PETER DECHAR: As opposed to the later ones being rather icy, rather hard forms, rigid forms. The background was cold, austere, expansive, endless.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Sometime—I think it's been the possibility for the pears to take on this character of presences has often been enhanced very much by the curious and haunting ambiguity of the space. [00:26:07] The shadow—play of shadows moving out from the forms, have suggested, you know, a kind of level space, and behind in an area, where you don't know where that level space would meet another kind of space, possibly.

PETER DECHAR: Well, it can be seen as that. It can be the general plane—well, if you consider the ground, the gray ground in the later paintings, to be a section of a cylinder, or a curved plane on which the pears were lying, it would be very reasonable that the shadows cast by the pears would lie on the plane, yet you couldn't see the edge. There was no horizon line, simply because the plane curved up.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PETER DECHAR: Yet I think there's another feeling that perhaps is more dominant, which is a sense of there being no plane at all, neither curved nor flat, just space, just air. Yet there is no possibility, then, of explaining the shadows. There's nothing for them to be cast on.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PETER DECHAR: Yet the shadows form a kind of reality. I don't know, I haven't thought about the relationship. I tend not to want to think about the relationship of that reality, the reality of the shadows, and the unreality of the space.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Of course the pears themselves have a very palpable reality, in spite of the fact that they exist in a very haunting and ambiguous space. [00:28:07] And yet they are—it seems to me, of course, that they can, perhaps associatively, be linked or implied almost human presences more easily, because of the fact that the form of the pear is very generalized. There's no, for instance texture on, you know, stems, or details that would distract from the simplicity and the austerity, even, of the basic form. Now in some other recent ones that you've done in the summer, smaller in scale, there have been kinder planes introduced.

PETER DECHAR: Perhaps more architectural space.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes. It's almost—they somehow recall Piero della Francesca to me, in some curious way.

PETER DECHAR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOROTHY SECKLER: The very classical and very pure—

PETER DECHAR: Well, my reason for including this kind of architectural space was simply to introduce more elements. Eventually I wanted to do away with the architectural nature of those elements. But I wanted to retain the complexity of the situation in some way. I don't really know how at this point. But I think maybe it can be seen as a rather logical progression, inasmuch as there was movement from the simple overall space that the three pears formed in the earlier pictures to the kind of individuality of the later pears. [00:30:07]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PETER DECHAR: Then there were—if there were five pears, there were five characters being talked about—

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

PETER DECHAR: —if you wish. And later on, the inclusion of the architectural elements allows for even more separate items to be dealt with. I find the need to do it, because, well, first of all, in the earlier paintings, I found that as I was working, I wasn't being held by them the way my mind was wandering. And it was going in other directions; there wasn't enough there to hold me. In fact, between those two perhaps series', I actually stopped painting for a month. In fact, I decided that I would stop painting completely forever. The earlier paintings were not nearly enough to hold me.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PETER DECHAR: I did become discouraged in painting as a medium. It wasn't serving its function for me. I started drawing, and that was very difficult. But I continued to draw, I continued to look out the window and do the things that must be done. One day I put an empty canvas there, made some drawings, lots of drawings, and started painting. And what came out was the later form. Nothing mysterious about it, but simply there was a need for a larger container, and I designed it. [00:32:06] And it held me, and I filled it for a while, but then that gave out, too small.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[END OF TRACK dechar65_1of1_reel_SideA_s.]

PETER DECHAR: It's just occurred to me that talking on the tape is somehow—I don't really have the sense that I'm talking to you.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PETER DECHAR: Yet on the other hand, I'm not really talking to myself. I feel the need to continue talking to make points, as one normally does in conversation, simply don't stop and reflect. And it's a very strange position for me, when I talk to someone, conversationally, or even to make a specific point on the deepest metaphysical level that I'm capable of. Well, somehow this—

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, we all find—I think it's just something you have to put up with. It's like, you know, going for the groceries. It's on that same level. Peter, as we were talking, we got the tape, however, yesterday, you mentioned something that I would like to return to, if you can, if you can seem to be revived again. And that was—now I'm forgetting, wait a minute.

[Audio Break.]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Peter, I'd like to talk for a short time about your years, you know, of your boyhood, which we had mentioned, we've touched on very briefly. I believe in a talk last summer when you told me that you had not been, at that time, in your teens, concerned with painting. [00:02:01] But your whole energy and interest had turned to mechanical things. And then, of course, I found that later, in talking to members of your family, that you must have had near genius for machinery and for technical things. And I just wondered if you'd like to put a bit of that into the record, how that developed in the summer.

PETER DECHAR: Well, I suppose throughout my entire life, the only drawing I did, until fairly recently, was designing things, recording ideas. It wasn't for the sake of making pictures, for instance, when I was five and six and seven, and however old children are when they do those things. I would draw pictures of boats, but they would be special kinds of boats or cars, special kinds of cars, that we do special things. Again, it was merely to document ideas. But that I did fairly infrequently. Most of my time was spent doodling with things; taking clocks apart, and I put them together, too. [Laughter.]

DOROTHY SECKLER: I think it was interesting about the—was it the gun that your father had brought home and taken apart?

PETER DECHAR: Yes, I think when I was about four, my father brought home a gun. My father, as you remember, was in the advertising business at that time. He was trying to expand a little bit and trying to make a line of toys. He bought a cap pistol, and he took it apart to see how it worked. [00:04:04] And he tried to put it together again, but he couldn't. So he left it. Actually, I think he worked until about 11:00 at night, gave up in disgust and went to bed. And I woke up in the morning, and I saw it lying there. And I wanted to play with it. So I put it together, I think, probably in a matter of a few minutes. And he woke up to my cap exploding. [Laughter.] He was very surprised.

DOROTHY SECKLER: That's amazing. You were really only four years old?

PETER DECHAR: I think, that's what they say, anyway.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Peter, was that when you were living at Great Neck in Long Island?

PETER DECHAR: Not Great Neck, no. I was born in Manhattan, my parents moved right away to Flushing. When I was about 11, they moved to Long Island, Nassau County, the farthest extreme, Oyster Bay.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PETER DECHAR: I guess I did what most boys did. I had an electric train set. In addition that, I was a model maker, made model airplanes. I got involved in radio-controlled models with little motors, kind of the usual teenage endeavors.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. At what point did this channel itself into painting, rather than making and constructing? You must have, at some point, met people who were painting, or seen things.

PETER DECHAR: I was exposed to painting more than most children. [00:06:00] My father was very involved in it. He went all but daily to the Museum of Modern Art, and I would go with him at least five times a year. It never meant too much to me. There was a kind of curiosity about—I think I remember things like white on white, and Dali's paintings, the soft clocks.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PETER DECHAR: When I was about 15, I made a painting that was kind of nice, and I accepted it as a nice object. There was certainly nothing more to it. At that time I was also building a boat, and a little car. It was just one of those things, it was something to do. A year later, I made another picture, and that one I never even finished. It was, again, just a thing to do. I got bored with it, and turned to something else. When I graduated from high school, I started studying Electrical Engineering at Lucknow University. And I got tired—no, I shouldn't even say I got tired of that, just simply the curriculum was extremely boring, the people were extremely boring. It was a matter of usual academic knowledge that really just couldn't hold me, simply couldn't hold me. And one day, about a month into the second semester, I packed up my belongings and left for New York. The following spring, one year out of high school, I started going to Pratt to study Industrial Design. [00:08:06] I stayed for the entire first year. At the end—actually, about the same time, about a month into the second semester, I got very disgusted. But I heard that Pratt was starting a new program for painters. The theory was that they would produce good art instructors by producing very talented painters. The whole curriculum was geared towards teaching people how to paint, or helping them to learn how to paint. And that was somewhat exciting, so I stayed for the rest of that year, finished the two semesters. And I stayed for about three months of my second year at Pratt, having just about nothing but art studio classes; a full day of painting, a full day of sculpture, a half day of drawing, half day of design. And the remaining two days were academics, which weren't terribly painful.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. What interested you the most at that point?

PETER DECHAR: At that point it was sculpture, by far. I was given the most freedom, we were given materials and a particular problem. My instructor was very nice about that. I refused to pursue the problems, but designed problems of my own, and so in that sense was entirely free. The painting was more difficult. There was a model there, and it was a very crowded room. The size of the canvas was limited by the number of people, space limitations. Somehow, I didn't even want to paint. [00:10:00] But throughout the painting classes, I would just bring in maybe collage material and glue things together, just forget about the model entirely.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PETER DECHAR: And I didn't like the instructor, anyway. Three months into the year, I decided that this whole thing was absurd. If I was ever going to be a good painter, nobody was going to teach me. I would design my own problems, I would decide what art is for me, and become a good painter, according to my own definition of good art.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Peter, what kinds of problems had you set yourself in sculpture?

PETER DECHAR: Actually, the problems were an avoidance of the original problems, but in terms of the limitations. For instance, if we were using plaster and wire mesh as a skeleton, you know, I would use those materials. But just, you know, I would do what I wanted with them. If the problem was to make—

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, you weren't making things, you were making abstract forms, I assume?

PETER DECHAR: They weren't totally abstract, no. They were somewhat figurative, animalistic.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Large or small?

PETER DECHAR: All pretty small. There, again, was a limitation, somehow impossible to make life-size things.

DOROTHY SECKLER: In spite of the fact that your painting classes were not interesting, what made you feel, at that point, that you wanted to go on painting? I realize you felt that you would do something on your own, it was quite different from what your instructors were sitting for you. But still, nothing has appeared in the picture to make it clear what painting seemed a desirable thing to do. [00:12:01]

PETER DECHAR: That's true, it wasn't painting. Again, at that time, sculpture was much more interesting for me. But there was a problem with sculpture that didn't exist with painting. Painting is somehow much easier. You have a canvas which can be placed against the wall, you have paints and brushes, and it's very simple. You always use the same materials. With sculpture, I was naturally involved with all the possibilities. I wouldn't want to limit myself and say that I was going to be a welded iron sculptor. If I was a sculptor, I would have to deal with many aspects of it, and certainly explore the many aspects. And this, of course, would require a tremendous studio, tremendous amount of money, the money that could buy big blocks of stone and large amounts of steel stock, perhaps even make my own bronze alloys. Just really explore everything. It was too difficult; I didn't have the money for any one of them. But I did have enough money to buy canvas and paints and things.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Were you living at home now, or were you on your own?

PETER DECHAR: I was living in Brooklyn, I had a rather large apartment. I was also working on electronic music, and so on. Experimental movies, or movies made up of fragments of film in addition to pieces of film that I shot specifically, I mean, for some specific reason.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Do you still have the movies?

PETER DECHAR: Yes, sure.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Or was it shown somewhere?

PETER DECHAR: None of the movies were shown, but I did make a piece of electronic music that was choreographed and danced to at Pratt. [00:14:09] You know, it wasn't terribly good. In fact, it was pretty poor.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Had you been interested in music throughout your life?

PETER DECHAR: No. No, I wasn't involved in any art throughout my life. I was simply involved in making things, and allowing myself the freedom to go after what I had to at the time. It was kind of a generalized, creative impulse, I think, just a very definite need to invent constantly. I was never a good reader. In fact, that was my biggest pitfall throughout my school career. I probably got the lowest mark in history in my school, simply because I couldn't read. I couldn't digest the material. I couldn't remember facts. I found that when I tried to read, and I certainly did make an effort on occasions, usually at the beginning of the year, my mind would wander. It would go somewhere else, and I would find myself thinking about something to make; a car, or anything at all.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And literature, books as such, novels, poetry, so on?

PETER DECHAR: Poetry never interested me. I think it's only natural that I wouldn't get interested in either poetry or literature, simply because I never had the facility to read. I couldn't read. I read very slowly, and I still do. It wasn't until about two years ago that I started reading novels very seriously, and actually I haven't been reading poetry for more than a year. [00:16:08] It's all very recent. The only thing that appears to be continuous throughout my life is this restlessness with things as they are, a very definite need to change things and make things.

DOROTHY SECKLER: That's very beautifully put. You must have been, as you came into the area painting, I suppose you had some artists that you admired, either in the near past or far past, or in the present. I gather that, for instance, Magritte, one that you've looked at or thought about. Were there others and—

PETER DECHAR: That's interesting, too. Actually I didn't realize that there was such a person as Magritte, until about maybe three years ago. And then I wasn't terribly interested. But I discovered something this winter that really bowled me over—the second painting that I made, again, when I was about 16, the one that I never finished—it was looking out of a cave, it was a figure in the center, very tiny figure. This figure was placed in a rather intensely colored rectangle. It was the same scene as the rest, it was one continuous scene, except that the center rectangle was more intense, and several other things that I won't bother to describe. [00:18:10] But I discovered a painting by Magritte about a year ago that was all but identical to it, form for form, scale—everything. It was the same painting. And there were many other things that related to what I'm doing now—

DOROTHY SECKLER: But you had never seen this painting, evidently.

PETER DECHAR: I had never seen the painting.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You're pretty sure you wouldn't have even seen reproductions.

PETER DECHAR: No, I know. I never saw it. Absolutely not. And I've discovered that there are many things that Magritte involves himself in that relate very closely to what I'm doing now, just attitudes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. How did you—did you read a book on his work? Or did you meet him at some point?

PETER DECHAR: I saw reproductions. And this year, while living in New Haven, I ran through the library daily and got every piece of information I could on Magritte, in addition to probably 15 or 20 other painters.

DOROTHY SECKLER: For instance, who else, besides Magritte?

PETER DECHAR: Well, I think the person—or the two painters that interest me most right now are Picasso and Schwitters.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PETER DECHAR: Picasso still confuses me. It certainly would seem to be a very different attitude than my own. Kind of exuberance that Picasso shows. Certainly it isn't to be found in my paintings. [00:20:01] Yet I certainly consider him to be about the finest living painter.

DOROTHY SECKLER: It's interesting that you should come to Picasso at this age, having already become a mature—"mature" perhaps is the wrong word—a painter who has projected a concept that's individual and uniquely your own, and in a fully-articulated form, and so on, whereas most of us, you know, like Picasso and Keens [ph]. He was an early idol that was then kind of interesting to work through. So it would be interesting to see what the impact of Picasso coming at this stage might be. Particularly in a generation which is not as much concerned, as was my generation, with the great, enormous power of invention that he shows in his work. Most younger artists have a kind of contempt for invention today, considered, like, you know, dispensable. Or you've got a different kind of invention.

PETER DECHAR: Yeah—

DOROTHY SECKLER: Perhaps use the different language.

PETER DECHAR: —I think you should say that, yes. It's an entirely—

DOROTHY SECKLER: But the power of transforming an object is something which can be referred back to nature, which you always find in Picasso, into a very inventive form, or series of forms.

PETER DECHAR: That I find very beautiful. But I think the thing that I really come back to continuously is the completely unself-conscious attitude that these things have, I mean, that they reflect, that are kind of complete freedom and buoyancy that he must have felt when he made them. [00:22:06] Completely playful.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Which Picassos are you thinking about now?

PETER DECHAR: I think just about anything that was done.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, he's so different from his classical drawings to those things of bathers, to *Three Musicians* for instance, *Woman in Mirror*.

PETER DECHAR: I think—well, maybe the word would be "spontaneity." But the, you know, what does that imply? Spontaneity in itself is most certainly not a virtue. Anyone can be spontaneous.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, I don't know. That's not easy at all. It's very difficult for me to be spontaneous.

PETER DECHAR: Well—

DOROTHY SECKLER: I mean, I think our lives educate us in every way to be unspontaneous, to lose our spontaneity and corrupted—

PETER DECHAR: Well, it's difficult to be spontaneous when you're conscious of painting. But it's certainly possible for you to be spontaneous in other things, for instance, conversation. You know, you might—I'm sure you're quite spontaneous when you're just talking to someone at a cocktail party.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, that kind of spontaneity is too valuable, I've found.

PETER DECHAR: Well, I think the point is that he is spontaneous, in that same way, while he's producing art. And he must be conscious that he's producing art. He can't simply ignore that fact; he knows that everything he does will be looked at and considered. He knows also, I'm sure, that he's totally committed to it, in a way. [00:24:05] Not consciously, but there can be nothing else, you know, when 2:00 or 3:00, whatever time it is, rolls around each day, he goes to the studio and he's there painting.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PETER DECHAR: Yet there's no self-consciousness.

DOROTHY SECKLER: No. Of course, he did say in this book that we've both been reading by Gilot, and as far as you, that he thought of his painting as a kind of diary. It was his diary, it was what happened to him, his reactions to what happened to him every day. And he didn't feel it was necessary to completely finish a painting. In a way he would like to, but it was more important to set down what he felt at the time, and get it out, even if only 80 or 90 percent, perhaps. Then it would be to continue with that time's experience, and then sort of try to hold onto it and perfect it in another time where he would really be—that experience would no longer be fresh and perhaps vivid, or we might use the word "spontaneous" there. Is that something you would accept as applicable to your own work, this attitude of the jour—you know, my painting is like a journal?

PETER DECHAR: Oh, absolutely. I didn't remember that, and I didn't remember reading that.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PETER DECHAR: Well, maybe I should go look for it, because it is something that I feel very strongly about. This, again, occurred throughout my life. I would never finish things. Really, I can talk about any number of major projects that involve, you know, \$100 worth of materials when I was 14 and 15, and worked all summer to make. [00:26:03] Then I would just drop as soon as it was fully established, you know? I saw the end, it was fully in sight. There was no need to finish it.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PETER DECHAR: I think I do that now. There comes a point in the painting when I see what's happened, it's all there. And I really could stop. I finish it so that I can forget about it and just shove it out of the way. Most certainly there is a point when all the—when my mind begins to wander, when I'm already starting on another painting.

DOROTHY SECKLER: That reminds me of what I was searching for before, Peter, and that was what you'd expressed last night about the thing in the painting really holds you. I mean, you know, what it is. You know, I do remember our conversation last night what it must be on the canvas to hold you, to create a certain curiosity, perhaps a certain—there's a certain relationship in some way to even an erotic fantasy, or sense of extreme sensuousness. But it mustn't be completed on that level, or it would cease to hold you. I think that was—that—I know I'm murdering it in an area.

PETER DECHAR: I think—no, I think—I don't really remember what I was thinking, but I do remember one thing, which is a simple statement that if you want to express beauty in a poem, you simply cannot use the word "beautiful."

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PETER DECHAR: In a painting, if you want to—I've used the word "fear" a number of times tonight. [00:28:02] If you want to express fear or anxiety, you can do it somehow by portraying it literally. Yet if that's what I'm feeling at the time, it'll come out. It's got to come out. And it certainly does. I sense it each time I look at the pictures, and I think a number of other people have sensed it when looking at those particular paintings.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PETER DECHAR: Also, the sense of buoyance that some of them have in freedom. What—

DOROTHY SECKLER: And sensuousness too, Peter. Wouldn't you admit that? I mean, there's a great sensuousness.

PETER DECHAR: I think the sensuousness is something that I must have. That—I think perhaps it does hold. I'm not quite sure if that's not actually a bad thing, in the sense that it's there to point out my bad faith, in a way, to give me something to like that I can reject. You know, to say that—to put in a beautiful thing, a luscious thing to hold me, because it does. It does attract me. It just does, some American dream, blonde-haired girl does attract me for an instant, but only to be repulsed by her. Then I realize that that's not what I want. It has nothing to do with it.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PETER DECHAR: I think there is a very definite sensuous quality to those paintings, to almost all of them. But it's not what I'm after. It's there for another reason.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. [00:30:00] That's a very beautiful statement, very significant statement, I think.

PETER DECHAR: I don't really remember what we were talking about last night.

DOROTHY SECKLER: No, I think you covered the ground. And what I will do is take out my own statement, because it was a distortion. But you've come back into it in just the way I hoped you would. It clarifies a great deal to me in looking at the paintings, because I think I've had this curious feeling of being pulled in different directions; one way by the sensuousness and the other way, you know, by the presence.

PETER DECHAR: I think there are a great number of very ironic things in the paintings. There is the sense of realism, yet for every ounce of realism, there is a surrealism, or a make-believe world. For every beautiful, sensuous thing, there is a cold, forbidding thing, ominous thing. For every good compositional element or dynamic movement, there is a bad one, one that absolutely sticks a knife in it and stops the movement. For each carefully-drawn line, precisely drawn curve and variation within the curve, there is a complete unbalance, a thing where one form is so close to the edge. [00:32:01] Yet for no reason, it's just there, and it's annoying. Yet near that same point, there will be a beautifully designed curve, in an ideal sense.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Peter, we've just come to the end of—

[END OF TRACK dechar65_1of1_reel_SideB_s.]

[END OF INTERVIEW.]