



Smithsonian
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**Oral history interview with Barbara Novak, 2013
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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 Barbara Novak on October 8, 2013. The interview took place in Manhattan, NY, and was conducted by James McElhinney for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Barbara Novak has reviewed the transcript. Her corrections and emendations appear below in brackets appended by initials. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

JAMES MCELHINNEY: This is James McElhinney speaking with Barbara Novak at her home in Manhattan on Tuesday the 8th of October, 2013. Good morning.

BARBARA NOVAK: Good morning.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: You studied at Barnard.

BARBARA NOVAK: Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But I understand that before decided to go into art history, to become a scholar and an intellectual by trade—an academic and a writer, that you were a painter first.

BARBARA NOVAK: Yes. Yes. From the age of about eight, I think.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Eight years old. And what were your first painting materials? How did you come-- how did you get started?

BARBARA NOVAK: I started with drawings. I had an uncle who taught me how to draw. I was interested in that.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: What was his name?

BARBARA NOVAK: William Kaufman. And he was very sweet. We had a large family—my mother's brothers and sisters, and grandma and grandpa, everybody lived together. He would, very kindly, instruct me how you did drawings; that was useful. I got very interested in it and that meant a lot to me.

And then I found out that I could have lessons, art lessons, in one of the big old houses. I remember there was a big white house on Ninth Street in Far Rockaway, where I was growing up. I went to take lessons there and managed to get my easel close to the window, so I got the best light, and lost any chance of learning geography at PS 39.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Why? Because you cut the class.?

BARBARA NOVAK: I cut the class, and then was determined to be an artist.

I remember distinctly, I had some wonderful teachers. I had Belle Icahn, Carl Icahn's mother, and I

had another lady named Mrs. Nevins, who I will never forget. One day it was snowing and I was dying to paint the snow scene. I came in to school expecting it to be a totally normal curriculum and she said, "I know what you want to do. You want to paint today." She said, "Go upstairs and paint." I've never forgotten that because it was so sweet and so aware of who I was. The other thing was, of course, that Mrs. Icahn ultimately gave me the art medal that I wanted so badly. I think of Carl Icahn and Mrs. Icahn every time I see his name on something.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: That's wonderful. But did you pursue any training at places like the Art Students League?

BARBARA NOVAK: I did indeed. I started taking the Long Island Railroad in from Rockaway on Saturday mornings, and I took courses at Parsons.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: At Parsons.

BARBARA NOVAK: Yes. Saturday morning water color classes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Do you recall the name of your teacher?

BARBARA NOVAK: I had a very interesting experience because I was working with somebody called Edward Melcarth who ultimately did the paintings at the Plaza—at the Pierre, excuse me. At the Pierre.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: At the Hotel Pierre.

BARBARA NOVAK: At the Hotel Pierre. That wonderful, wonderful scene of Italy. I only had a couple of classes with him, and then he went off to Italy, and never saw him again.

Then I had somebody called Joseph Presser who was an Austrian. And he encouraged me to be very free and to—He was modern, so to speak. I remember my grandmother saying, what are you coming home with all these things? I like what you did first.

I went from Realist to being much more Expressionist. And then followed that up, ultimately, at the Art Students League where I did some of my best early paintings, I would say.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Who did you work with at the League?

BARBARA NOVAK: I'm trying to remember his name. [Louis Bosa -BN]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mangravete? Did you work with him?

BARBARA NOVAK: No I didn't work with Mangravete. I could have worked with Kuniyoshi, but I had heard that he was very tough on students and I was afraid of him. I can't remember—I know I had Mangravete at Columbia. With him I had terrible disagreements. But I can't remember who I worked [with at the Art Students League. He] was a short, little man and looked at me and said something to the effect that he didn't expect such powerful paintings from such a young girl, which was nice. [Louis Bosa -BN]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, I'm trying to imagine if it was anybody like Marsh or any of those people.

BARBARA NOVAK: No. I met Marsh.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: He was there for a long time.

BARBARA NOVAK: I met Marsh socially at one point. But no, I never [worked with him -BN]—and then I worked with—it may come to me, it may not.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Dickenson was there too, I guess.

BARBARA NOVAK: I never got to Dickenson. That would have been wonderful. I love Dickenson's work.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I understand his classes were tiny and—

BARBARA NOVAK: I was very young. I probably wouldn't have been able to get into them. I don't know. But I certainly admire Dickenson tremendously [inaudible]. He would have been a fascinating person to [work with -BN]—the person I know now is Bill Scharf, who did that painting.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Of course, he's—

BARBARA NOVAK: He's a very close friend of mine.

[Cross talk.]

I wrote a catalog essay for one of his shows.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I'm working on a book on painting with League instructors, and he's one of them.

BARBARA NOVAK: Oh yes, he's wonderful.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I interviewed him, and great stories about growing up having access to NCYF and—

BARBARA NOVAK: Right. Well, I had access to Andrew. He wanted to paint me at one point, but I was teaching at Barnard and I [inaudible] at the time.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And then he found Helga.

BARBARA NOVAK: And then he found Helga. And I thought he would take much too much of my time.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Probably. Well, he was a meticulous painter so it would have been long sittings.

BARBARA NOVAK: I didn't want it. I didn't want it. But, Brian was writing about him.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So having this keen interest in painting you must have spent a lot of time haunting the museums.

BARBARA NOVAK: I lived in the museums. I didn't just haunt the museums, I inhabited them. And when I got to Europe on a Fulbright, as I did from Harvard, I think I saw every painting in every museum, every palace, every church that could be seen in a year's time, which was really an overdose. Nobody could have seen more, or have been more obsessed.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: You survived the experience.

BARBARA NOVAK: Well, that's a good way to put it.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It's like the Nietzsche quote, "What doesn't kill you—if you survive it, I guess it makes you—

BARBARA NOVAK: —it makes you stronger."

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It improves you.

BARBARA NOVAK: It did. It was an extraordinary experience in Western art and it was major in my development. Of course at the time, I thought I was going to be doing a dissertation on Flemish 15th century painting.

I was still a student of Held's, and Belgium, where I was situated—the Belgians were very reluctant to let Fulbrighters out. They felt that we should stay in their country and they didn't like us going elsewhere. On my board was Paul Coremans, the famous van Meegeren expert. The sweetest man in the entire world.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: The van Meegeren expert?

BARBARA NOVAK: Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: That's such a great story.

BARBARA NOVAK: It's the most wonderful story. I can tell you parts of it. And he was one of the greatest people I could ever have encountered because he was totally supportive of me. Since we needed the permission of the Fulbright board to get to leave the country I would say to him, oh, there's a van der Goes in the basement of the Pitti Palace, and I absolutely must see there. I can't possibly finish this dissertation without it.

I would get to Italy, and of course then I would study all Italian painting at the same time. This kept going on this way, so I got all over Europe looking for Flemish 15th century paintings, and exploring all of the history of Western art at the same time.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And I guess realizing too, that while it was often taught in terms of national identity: French painting, Flemish painting, German painting, Italian painting, in fact it was quite a global scene. It was quite a mobile scene. These artists were traveling around—

BARBARA NOVAK: Oh yes. There was all the Flemish influence on Italian art, and it's that kind of thing as well.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right. And then to—

BARBARA NOVAK: van der Weyden, and what have you.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: There's that exhibition a few years ago at the Met of a Michelangelo copy of a—I want to remember the correct German artist, but it was a—he made a painting after a print. It wasn't Altdorfer, but one of those guys.

And actually the palette of the Michelangelo painting was a German palette. So even though he might have been working from the print he had to have seen northern pictures in person in Florence. And so this whole idea that well, you've got French painters only living in France and only

looking at other French painters, and German—you know.

BARBARA NOVAK: There was a great interchange, I think, at that time, and they didn't [inaudible] why.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So you were just reenacting what all of these artists were doing in their own lifetimes.

BARBARA NOVAK: Yeah. And so—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Running around having a look at everything.

BARBARA NOVAK: At everything.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Great.

BARBARA NOVAK: It was a great experience. And of course, the reason I got into American was because they kept saying there was no American art.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: You're going to show them. What made you pick Barnard? You mean, as a person who is on this sort of track to be a painter, what made you choose a gender-specific college as opposed to an art school, let's say, or an—

BARBARA NOVAK: Oh well, I think I was really very innocent. I really didn't know very much about what you did or how you did it. I just needed—my parents felt I needed a college education and they couldn't afford to send me away. And Barnard was within the vicinity. I was, again, so innocent, I simply said well, all right, I'll apply to Barnard, and if they won't let me in then I won't go to college. I only made one application. So I got there.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: What were your high school friends doing at this time? Where they also mostly heading off to college or were they—

BARBARA NOVAK: No, there were lot of them getting married—this was 1946—and working, and some went to college. I lost track with them once I got to Barnard. I made a lot of new friends, very good friends, actually.

Barnard really changed my life because until then I had been living a very suburban life coming into the city. I felt as though New York was my city, but I had not widened my sphere very much. And when I got to Barnard, wow, that was an incredible experience for me. It's something I will never, never forget because it opened me up in the most extraordinary way, and literally, in every way. Politically, you name it.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Let's talk a little bit about pre-Barnard years. What were your parents like? What did they do?

BARBARA NOVAK: They had a women's clothing shop, but that was because of the Depression. My mother had wanted to be a dress designer. My father was a textile buyer. Had they not been Depression kids who had lost their money in the Depression they probably wouldn't have been retailers—I know they probably would have done other things.

The thing was that it was a very close family, and that was very important. They worked terribly, terribly hard. One thing my brother and I knew was that we had to work hard too in college to get

scholarships and things like that.

And they were education—completely education aware. The one thing we had to have was the education. It had to be more. They were both very bright and they were both great readers. And they were people who allowed both of us to develop exactly as we wanted to. Anything we wanted that they could give us.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Had either of them attended college?

BARBARA NOVAK: No.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So you were the first?

BARBARA NOVAK: I was the first. And my brother was the second. I went to Barnard and Harvard, and my brother went to Yale all the way through law school. They wanted the best educations for us. We got the best educations with their help and with scholarships, and that set us on totally different words.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So tell me a little bit about Barnard. How did you then find the art instruction at Barnard? It was less practical, obviously, than going to Parsons or the League. Were there—

BARBARA NOVAK: It was not practical. They couldn't give me an art class because they didn't have it at that point, so they stuck me in art history. There was no studio component. The introductory course had some small studio component where people learn how to use the different materials.

And that's how I got into art history is almost by accident. In fact I remember when I said to my father, what should I study? And we weren't sure whether there was art, he said, well, you could study literature. He loved books.

I came in as a lit major, and switched from that very quickly by my sophomore year. Not for any real reason, except I knew immediately when I got into an art history class that that was where I belonged. So it was luck. Otherwise I probably would have kept writing novels. And then that would have been the choice.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well you've written a few.

BARBARA NOVAK: I've written a few. I have two published and about three in the drawer.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So when was the first time you were cognizant or bowled over by a work of art?

BARBARA NOVAK: When I saw the Kandinsky that Julius Held had asked me to write about—a painting in the New York museum, the Kandinsky at the Guggenheim. I think it was the *White Edge*.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: That's a 1913, around there.

BARBARA NOVAK: Yes. Oh, that was the period that I loved. I didn't care for late Kandinsky at all.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Too rigid.

BARBARA NOVAK: Much too, much too geometric for me. I was taken by the fluidity and the expressiveness of his early work. I still am. I still love those Kandinskys.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So you were, more or less, prepared to kind of encounter that painting by your experience at the League and at Parsons, and your uncle.

BARBARA NOVAK: Yes. And just my feeling for it. By then I had already begun, I think, to paint in watercolor because—I had my choice. I could go down to a finished basement and paint there. I didn't like that. Or I could paint in my bedroom and I hated the smell of terpenes, so I decided that I wanted to paint watercolors in my bedroom. And that's what I did.

That made an enormous difference. I've been painting—people often say to me, since I'm a watercolorist, well, isn't that a difficult medium? Well, it's not to me because it's been part of my life for so long.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: They're all difficult.

BARBARA NOVAK: But watercolors, they always say because you can't change it, and this, that and the other—and I never found it so at all.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It's entirely mutable and you can do anything you-- provided you got good paper.

BARBARA NOVAK: Well, the paper is major. I mean, all my life I've had trouble with papers. I remember, I started with great Watermans, couldn't find them there. Every time I had a paper I really adored it went out of production and that made it very difficult sometimes.

From the mid '60s on, I've painted nothing but flowers and nothing but watercolor. That has always been a problem. It's like lipsticks. You get a lipstick that you love, and all of a sudden they don't do the color anymore, or the company goes out of business. [Inaudible].

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So you have to buy like a whole case of the stuff—

BARBARA NOVAK: And figure it out.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —store it—

BARBARA NOVAK: Yes, but then it spoils.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yes. Right.

BARBARA NOVAK: It hardens, or the watercolors dry up.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I guess you can't cellar lipstick like wine.

BARBARA NOVAK: No, I don't think you can. And it's interesting with watercolors too. Sometimes I've bought them on sale and then they're old. The tubes won't squeeze anymore.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: They turn into little watercolor mummies.

BARBARA NOVAK: Yes. Still in the tube.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: You can always just slice the tube open and—

BARBARA NOVAK: I haven't thought of that. I have a lot of old tubes. Now that's something I hadn't thought of. How clever of you. I'm not very good manually that way.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Let your husband handle the sharp implements in opening the wine.

BARBARA NOVAK: Yes, he would. He'd be delighted to.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Do a little surgery.

BARBARA NOVAK: He uses—what are they called? Relytex? What do you call the kind he uses?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Acrylic?

BARBARA NOVAK: Acrylics.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: They've gone through-- well, now they're all called acrylics. They used to be called latex and—

[Cross talk.]

BARBARA NOVAK: That's right. That's what I couldn't remember. Latex.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: That was some kind of brand name, I think, years ago.

BARBARA NOVAK: Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Like we still call a photocopy a Xerox.

Cross talk.]

Evan though it's usually not even the same technology.

BARBARA NOVAK: I don't know.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: They have things that are the language. So what actually persuaded you, what was your aha epiphany moment where you saw that the history of art was—

BARBARA NOVAK: Oh, I was set in it once I got into Held's class.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: He inspired you personally?

BARBARA NOVAK: Oh my god.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Describe him.

BARBARA NOVAK: At that particular time he looked like Paul Henreid in *Now, Voyager*. And all of us had dreams of the two cigarettes and running away with him. [Laughs.] He had a very sweet wife who worked at the New York Historical Society.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: You were all Bette Davis, right?

BARBARA NOVAK: Oh no, no. I wouldn't have been Bette Davis because I didn't like her terribly, but I certainly wanted him to be Paul Henreid. And he had that accent. He was a brilliant lecturer, even better than Shapiro for me. He, literally, would wring you dry with a lecture. You would come out just panting. It was an erotic experience.

He made you feel the works so powerfully. That was very important for me to understand—when I

was teaching myself, that the students had to enter the works and feel them themselves. I feel very strongly about how important the formal component of a work of art is. And I think I feel it more than most art historians, which is why I have developed a kind of semi-Wölfflinian attitude to works of art as a base, before one gets into contextual problems, and things of that nature.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So just simply speaking about the work of art as an autonomous object with certain mechanical properties, certain physical properties—

BARBARA NOVAK: Absolutely.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yes.

BARBARA NOVAK: Like a person.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yes. Well that's very much—that really parallels sort of the way painting was studied in those days too.

BARBARA NOVAK: It is too.

[Cross talk.]

No absolutely. That was modernism. I remember distinctly, though, when I discovered Wölfflin. It was maybe with Held, I'm not sure. But when I was in graduate school, somewhere along the line, it became even more important to me to stress the physicality of the work, and read it as though you were reading a language, an artistic language. And know that all the components of it we're saying what the artist wanted—hoped you would get from it.

And then, ultimately—and this is the difference between my first book and the second book—then finally get into the context added to it, not ever losing it, in order to stop the reading of a work of art. I still feel that very strongly. I feel that's what gone wrong with a lot of art history. I'll always feel that way.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It's gotten away from the object, from the—

BARBARA NOVAK: You can't get away from the object. If you get away from the object, you get away from its author. You get away from the artist. And I don't believe we should do that, as long as a work of art is made by an individual who is breathing, living, and somehow expressing himself.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: We were talking about this earlier, just prior to our arrival here, is how many exhibitions one sees, like the Barbara Bloom at the Jewish Museum, or the Rosemarie Trockel at the New Museum last year—how the sort of curators as artists, artists as curators, and the art being about sort of the dialogue between the objects, but not paying the same amount of attention to the objects themselves.

BARBARA NOVAK: It's a mistake. It's a mistake that's been going on since the 70s. I think—I remember once there was a student in one of my classes, my American Art class, and she was having deep trouble with the course. I knew she had been studying art history and I said, well, what is your trouble?

She said, nobody's ever asked me to enter into this work this way. I don't know how to do it. So she puzzled herself through the class. And the following year she came running up to me in one of the corridors outside my office and she said, "Professor Novak, Professor Novak, I've just discovered

style."

[MCELHINNEY LAUGHING]

BARBARA NOVAK: I've never forgotten that.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Really.

BARBARA NOVAK: I know. And I've never forgotten that. She had just discovered style. The way she said it was, I'm into style. It was a major discovery for her, one that should have been at core.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Obvious.

BARBARA NOVAK: Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: One of the first things, one of the first concepts anybody—

BARBARA NOVAK: Yes, I know because one of the lovely things that has happened to me after all these years—I started teaching at Barnard in '58—was how many students, former students of mine from the 60s and 70s and 80s, but particularly when I was doing the introductory course where I stressed formalism before I did chronology—I separated it out. I did three months of formalism before they went to Egypt. All kinds of formalism, the same thing I have done in Europe, everything, [inaudible].

They come up to me and say, I've traveled all over the world and I've used that course, and they've never forgotten it. It's very satisfying. It's deeply satisfying that you can make a contribution to somebody's life for the rest of their life, by teaching them how to see, which should be the most basic thing for a teacher, an art teacher, an art history teacher.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well I'd imagine you'd approve of the new program at Columbia that's paying for their doctoral students to go take drawing classes.

BARBARA NOVAK: I didn't know that.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It was in the Schermerhorn.

BARBARA NOVAK: Well, you know—you know what? That's so amusing to me.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Because you took drawing. That's where you came from.

BARBARA NOVAK: Not only that, but art history, when I entered, even with Marion Lawrence, had a technical component to it. You could do drawings in that limited way, and Julius had had to have always done drawings. And Meyer Shapiro, also, was something of an artist.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It's just doing the analysis of composition or going into a museum with a sketch book.

BARBARA NOVAK: That's a wonderful thing to do because that's the way the old artists learned, through those copies. And that teaches you too. You can really start from there and develop.

[Cross talk.]

—said, a pastiche, starting in pastiche.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Now before you could draw a plaster cast you had to copy prints. Held really was the one who launched you on—

BARBARA NOVAK: No question.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —your career.

BARBARA NOVAK: No question. No question. I was, really, enormously lucky to have somebody who was so inspiring to me. I went in different directions than he did and I knew that, because I went even further into the object than he did. He managed to make you feel it through enthusiasm. And I broke it down into a system where you could actually get into each physical part and understand it. I think that was the contribution that I made to what he had already done.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So what point in your education did you begin to ponder the idea of working with American art?

BARBARA NOVAK: There's a backtrack there. I graduated from Barnard, I needed a job. I got a job at the Brooklyn Museum docenting, which was also tremendously important to my development because there's a good collection of American art.

And also, docenting in those days involved being part of an education department that took all kinds of classes, all kinds of people, from young students—from elementary school students through graduate students, to adult groups. They would make an appointment and the docent would deal with them. So I was dealing with adults and I was dealing with children.

I was dealing with the American art collection. I knew there was a great art collection there of American art, a very fine one, which had been built up by Jack Baur before he went to the Whitney, John I.H. Baur, who was one of the best 19th century scholars prior to my generation. And had written, of course, the famous luminous historical perspectives in 1954, which not only inspired me but inspired by my husband, who was sitting in Ireland reading it at the same time.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And you had yet to meet.

BARBARA NOVAK: We had yet to meet. I knew his work very well—Baur's work very well. I knew the collection. I only had seen the one Lane at that particular point. But I knew there was an American art. I hadn't yet fastened on Luminism.

That came out of Baur's essay, and it came out of the Karolik collection when I got Boston to study at Harvard. Because then I knew what I was doing because Mr. Karolik, bless him, who became a good friend, a real character about whom Brian wrote a lovely essay about his firm—the Boston museum made it into a small book.

Mr. Karolik had a fresh eye, and an eye—even though it was the curator—who I now forget, that he worked with—to whom he gave free reign for choosing things. Mr. Karolik had his own taste and it was a taste which included American folk art, very importantly.

If I wanted to see a new painting that the Boston Museum had acquired of American folk artists, he would invite me into his office. I knew that it meant he was going to pinch me. In exchange for the pinch, I got to see a great work of art that had been acquired by the Boston Museum.

He was wonderful. The first time I met him I had lunch with him. I think it was Reuben's NY in the 50s, and he spilled red borscht all over my beige dress. Brian and I both loved him very dearly, and

we got to be good friends.

The Karolik collection had Lanes and Heades in it, and it had the folk art in it, which gave me my understanding of the conceptual root of American art and how so many great artists had developed from a conceptual root. And gave me an understanding of how you went, in Wölfflinian terms, from the primitive unconsciousness of the plane to the classic consciousness of the plane. So it was very important to me.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: You, speaking earlier about being in Europe and being on the Fulbright to Belgium studying Flemish painting, you started to comment on someone having told you that there was no such thing as American art, you were going to prove them wrong.

BARBARA NOVAK: It was perverse.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Can you expand on that a little bit?

BARBARA NOVAK: Yes. Because of the Brooklyn Museum collection, on which I had lectured, I knew there was a fine collection of American art. And it was irritating, if nothing else, to have people say, well, there is no American art. You know, you guys don't exist, when I knew otherwise.

In the middle of the Fulbright, in the middle of the time that I was there, I decided to switch fields. I continued working with the Flemish material. In fact, Coremans, one day said, come on, I'm going to take the Ghent Altarpiece out of its fireproof scaffolding. Do you want to come along?

And so we went to Ghent. And he would flip a button and all the paintings would come out, the panels would come out of the armature, and he would put them in my lap. I was sitting on the floor. So I had the Ghent Altarpiece in my lap. It was a crazy experience.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I can imagine.

BARBARA NOVAK: It was a great experience. But to go back to this business of American art, no, I thought, hey, there's something there. And it made sense to me because there was very little activity in the Flemish 15th century area at that time. And you had to make a decision as to whether Master of Flemalle and Van der Weyden were the same person. Or you had to decide whether you wanted to discard Hugo van Eyck and let Jan van Eyck have all of the work assigned him. Or you could do something with Joos van Ghent.

So there were these problems but there weren't many problems. If I had stayed in the field I know I would have worked on Hugo van der Goes because I loved his work. But it wasn't enough. And I said, god, there's all this work to be done in the American field. I know, I know the work.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So at that time that was kind of almost like a bottom feeding endeavour. Nobody was paying attention to it and—

BARBARA NOVAK: That's true.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —and it needed to be studied and elevated.

BARBARA NOVAK: And I thought that was a more worthwhile scholarly thing to do, to really go into a field that needed work. Plus, I felt it was ours. It wasn't that I thought that it was the greatest art in the world, but I thought it was tremendously interesting.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I'm sure that when you embarked on this that you must have given a look at whatever the existing literature was, like the Tuckerman, or whatever, and then Goodrich or other people who were—

BARBARA NOVAK: Absolutely.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So what was your, as a young scholar, what was your assessment of the literature on American art.

BARBARA NOVAK: First of all, they were always trying to discover, at that moment, what was American in American art. I thought they were going about it the wrong way because they kept worrying about the subject matter and they weren't looking.

I decided rather early on that there was such a thing called as-- it wasn't necessarily called it, but I called it the American look. You could see the difference if you were really looking because already I had seen all of European art. And I could put a European painting the next to an American painting, and I would know the difference.

I remember at a certain point in my doctoral oral at Harvard, which I think I took before I went abroad, of course. They put us in a room with stuff and they said, say where it was done, who did it, what date it was and so on. It was part of the oral exam that we were taking. Every time they passed a certain painting my colleagues said to me, oh that's American, that's yours Barbara, and it didn't look American to me. It wasn't. It turned out that it wasn't American.

I think they were looking at one of the Germans who looked American to them—Nolde, it was a Nolde, and they kept mixing it up with George Luks. It was very strange.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Ouch.

BARBARA NOVAK: Ouch.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Ouch. Poor Nolde.

BARBARA NOVAK: Yes. Well, it really was funny. But I knew it wasn't American because I knew what the look should be. And I kept just saying, sorry, it's not mine it's yours.

So I did feel that there was a look, and I felt that the way to go about it was not to go by subject matter or stuff like that. That's not what makes it American. What makes it American, fundamentally, to me this day, is still a look—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: The formal—

BARBARA NOVAK: A formal thing that has to do with certain geometries, and it has to do with the way that the object, and it has to do with the way the light falls. It has to do with the attitude to the plane. And for the most part, it's still true, unless you're dealing with something like a Hassam, or something which is trying to look like a French Impressionist and might assume some of those characteristics.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Which is, you could say, affected, in a way, an affected style.

BARBARA NOVAK: Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Do you agree with Scully's assessment of the American preference for linear form, like a tangible—

BARBARA NOVAK: Oh, I don't know Scully's work. But certainly, I would agree with that.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, you know, the architectural historian.

BARBARA NOVAK: I know. I know who he is.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Did you ever interact with him, personally?

BARBARA NOVAK: Only one time when I brought a dog to the CAA, and he thought that was great.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: He was very popular lecturer.

BARBARA NOVAK: I know he was. He was the thing at Yale at a certain time. Yes. Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But he wrote—there was a period—

BARBARA NOVAK: I never read him.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But it was certainly years later. It was certainly not when you were and—

BARBARA NOVAK: No. By then I was a professor [inaudible].

JAMES MCELHINNEY: This was, got to be in the 70s, he wrote this thing. About the same time Alfred Kazin wrote his book about American literature.

BARBARA NOVAK: That was pretty good. Kazin added some real understanding. Kazin was the one who wrote, somewhere, that Americans have angels in all the trees, or something like that. I always thought it was very appropriate. It was very appropriate for the role of religion and spirit in American art.

No I don't know—the linearity, yes, up to a point. But I think it's more—and I don't know what he meant about the tangibility. But I do think that—Henry James who said if you scratch anything in America you hit nature. I think that that's true and I think that Americans were always trying to find something tangible on this continent.

That is something that I know I've written. I don't know what Scully's written, but I know I've written that. That need for a tactility, of holding on somehow. Maybe because, on some levels, they felt it was sliding as always. Emerson has spoken about that, sliding. I think that's always there.

We're still a very young country. We're a young civilization.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: The world's oldest republic.

BARBARA NOVAK: Yes, something like that. We are so young compared—I go back to Ireland with Brian, and there is all the wonderful, wonderful deep earth of myth and literature, and great, great, great—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Stones.

BARBARA NOVAK: —nature and stones and all that, all that. And the ancient forts, which I have the fun of discovering with him, just wandering around the fields and finding things that nobody—

[Cross talk.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: He's from—

BARBARA NOVAK: He's from Ireland.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But the northwestern part.

BARBARA NOVAK: No, he's from near Dublin.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, okay.

BARBARA NOVAK: No, he's not north Ireland. No, no. No, he's from Dublin and area. He was raised in Bray, near the sea.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, Bray. Sure.

BARBARA NOVAK: He was raised in Bray as I was raised in Rockaway.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It's near—

BARBARA NOVAK: Near the water.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Near Wicklow.

BARBARA NOVAK: Exactly. And has family in Wexford, a whole large family.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Roundwood and Avoca and—

[Cross talk.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Beautiful.

BARBARA NOVAK: We'd drive through Avoca to get to Wexford. Family is still there. We have nieces and nephews and grandnieces and nephews.

I can see the difference between—and that's another thing that was very important to me writing about it—the age of Europe as opposed to the age of America. And the only age that we can even compete with is something like the Rambles, where you can still see five billion years in America.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Here in the park.

BARBARA NOVAK: Yes. I mean, Wisconsin, 75,000 years is not very much. Brian and I went out at one point with a former student of mine, to Utah, and I did that travel around it. When we hit the five billion years I could not believe it. I was stunned by it. It was the most majestic and wonderful thing.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: This was Canyonlands, or—

BARBARA NOVAK: Yes. No, it was the—when you go down. There are all these national parks that they had, and you'd do a rim. You'd start in Utah with Brigham Young University. I had done a

lecture on Bierstadt and Brian did an installation piece, a corner piece, and we agreed to come together and do those things if they would take us out into the landscape.

So two Mormon couples took us out into the landscape, two academic couples, and we had the most wonderful time. We had a wonderful time with the Mormons. Anyway, they were terrific. They laughed a lot and they talked about family, which Americans, particularly New Yorkers, don't do. And they kept saying, my mother this, and my mother that. It gave you a chance to say, well, my mother this, my mother that. It was very homey, to say the least.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: New Yorkerthe New Yorker attitude about history is so—last week is history. The week before last is when Hitler was—or when they killed Caesar, right? So the sense of time here is in a state of perpetual suspension it seems like. But in Utah, or the West, you have this geological antiquity that's in your face every day.

BARBARA NOVAK: Oh, it's stupendous. It's stupendous. And that was so meaningful to me.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mormons are also fascinated, as you know, with genealogy because if they convert you they convert, automatically, all of your ancestors. It's a interesting belief system.

BARBARA NOVAK: I thought so. I was amused by it.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: How long were you on that trip?

BARBARA NOVAK: Oh, it was only maybe a week or 10 days. But it was really deeply meaningful. Another very meaningful trip that I had out West, actually, was after I wrote *Nature and Culture*. And I was invited by a group of academics from Wisconsin from Milwaukee University to explore the expedition. We were trying to reestablish, or redo, Timothy O'Sullivan's western exploration.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh yeah. With Powell and King and—

BARBARA NOVAK: Well, Timothy O'Sullivan, who went out by himself, I think, in the year 1860 [1868 -BN]—I don't know exactly, but—because I had written about that kind of thing in my chapter on, I think, the locomotive, or whatever, they wanted me to come and help them to find the spots that Timothy O'Sullivan had. I swam in Pyramid Lake. And I was the only woman there with all these guys. We had a biologist, we had a geologist, we had a botanist. They re-formed the whole group of people who would have gone out like that.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It's a great story, and a terrific history of art and exploration that hasn't really been—

BARBARA NOVAK: Oh, I love those stories.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —discussed—well it has to a degree by now. People like—you've got Goetzmann, and Joni Kinsey.

BARBARA NOVAK: Well Goetzmann, of course, he's somebody I did get to know and love. He was wonderful. Yes. And his *Exploration and Empire* was very important.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Wonderful book. And I think his son is still—

BARBARA NOVAK: YeahYes, he started working with his son. We were in touch for a long time, years ago. He loved my work. He brought me out there to lecture. We really had a good

friendship and I had great respect for him. I think he had won a Pulitzer for that book.

That became very interesting to me, and that experience was unbelievable. In my novel, *Alice's Neck*, I have a chapter where she goes out West and that's partly based on that particular experience.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And what year would that have been, you're—?

BARBARA NOVAK: Well, let's see. *Nature and Culture* was published first in 1980, so it must have been a couple of years later. And then, I think, my novel was published in 1986, *Alice's Neck*, and that has a chapter where she goes out West, and so on. The novel is not autobiographical. I had a nephew who wanted to know if it was about me and did I have three affairs at once. And I said, no, it wasn't me.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It's fiction, dear.

BARBARA NOVAK: It's fiction, dear. But you do use pieces of your experience to write fiction. That was an enormously powerful experience for me that I managed to get into the book. But that was funny.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So how did it did actually travelling to the West and following—Did you fly out or did you drive out?

BARBARA NOVAK: I remember this so well. I remember a friend of mine, Ann McCoy, an artist who brought me, I think, some boots or something, because she was from the West. She wanted me to have the boots, whatever. I remember picking up the straw hat and I had a canteen, which is still upstairs here somewhere. Brian saw me off.

I flew to Reno and met these guys I had never seen before in my life, and got into a van with them, and set off for Pyramid Lake. So we got onto the reservation. We were on reservation land the whole time that we were there.

I remember the very first night I was frightened. We were sleeping in sleeping bags, and they also surrounded me in a circle in their sleeping bags to protect me. Of course when I got up in the morning, having heard my first coyote and picked up my sleeping bag, there was a scorpion under it.

It really was extraordinary. They were very protective of me. The older guys, especially, would bring me coffee in my sleeping bag. The younger ones, I was just another girl. So it's a funny kind of difference between the guys I was with.

Then I became very, very fond of all of them. It was a wonderful experience really, an extraordinary experience. I stayed with them—they were going to stay longer—I stayed with them about 10 or 12 days, I remember. And we traveled.

Probably the best part of that—craziest part of that—was that at a certain point they figured out that Timothy O'Sullivan had, way in the distance, gotten to Karnak [inaudible]. And they thought they saw it but you couldn't go with a van. So they were going to track across. We were in Nevada in the summer and it was very hot.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It can get warm there.

BARBARA NOVAK: They had parked the van on the mountain, a couple of miles away from where

we were. We were on top of the Humboldt mountain. They decided, and I decided, too, that I wouldn't be able to track that far. So they left me in the middle of Humboldt mountain sitting on a rock with a snake kit that was of no use to me whatever, and my canteen, and they disappeared for about five hours. I sat in the middle of Humboldt mountain—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: They didn't leave you a revolver or something—

BARBARA NOVAK: Nothing, I had nothing.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —in case you were challenged by wildlife?

BARBARA NOVAK: Well there were, of course, rattlesnakes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh yeah, but they're not aggressive.

BARBARA NOVAK: [Laughs.] Anyway, to sit on the top of Humboldt mountain and be surrounded by that circle was, again, one of the great experiences in my life. They finally came back—I had no recourse. I would have died up there if they hadn't come back because I couldn't drive, I didn't know how to drive. I couldn't get into the van even if I had found the van again.

Nobody was up there but us. But they came back finally- carrying a piece of Karnak which I have upstairs somewhere, for me. They came back okay and we continued with our trip. I kept that as a souvenir of the experience.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: What was the outcome of the expedition? Was there a book?

BARBARA NOVAK: I don't what they might have done in Wisconsin. They never kept in touch with me. I never really saw them again.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Now I'm beginning to understand. There is the American Geographic Institute, or some such—

BARBARA NOVAK: That may have been something like that.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I'm sure that's not the proper name of it, but University of Wisconsin, in Milwaukee, has as part of its library, a Geographic Institute with a large collection of maps and so forth. I would imagine they might have [inaudible].

BARBARA NOVAK: I know that the geologer was always working with his papers, and they were all keeping papers very carefully. They were redoing what the 19th century people out there had done there. There was a photographer with us, so certainly something happened, but I lost track of them.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Was he doing wet plate photography or was he doing just SLR?

BARBARA NOVAK: I think he was trying to do as close as he could to O'Sullivan.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Interesting. There was a man in, I think, 2000, a photographer in Colorado who, working with the Colorado Historical Society, produced—and I want to say it was published in 2000—he produced a book comparing contemporary view camera photographs in color with William Henry Jackson from the 19th century.

[Cross talk.]

BARBARA NOVAK: It was going on around the same time. There were other people who were doing reconnoitering the Rambles [? -BN]. That's what it was. It was fascinating and wonderful.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It must've make you feel much closer, in a physical sense, to people like Bierstadt, Moran, and all these guys who went along with these expeditions.

BARBARA NOVAK: After that, I think, I taught a semester—not a semester, a summertime thing at Yellowstone. I remember noticing that we would track to some of the material that Moran had. And Moran had done these wonderful watercolors, which still, as I understand, belong to the Park Service.

Some of those stones you wouldn't have believed were real. I would have thought they were surreal, and they were made up. They turned out to have been exact.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Crazy volcanic—

BARBARA NOVAK: Yes. crazy volcanic stuff. Really exciting. It's so wonderful to go out there and really be in that landscape that they had been in, and to get the feel of what it must have been like at the beginning. It really changes. I mean, we shouldn't just go from New York to California. There really should be a stop in that area of Nevada, and Utah, and other places like that.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Wyoming.

BARBARA NOVAK: Wyoming, definitely. Wyoming, definitely. I remember going to Montana with a friend whose grandfather had done photographs of the Indians up there. And then we stayed one day with an old Indian, one of the [Crows -BN]—who was still there. Of course, the Crows had helped what's his name—the long-haired guy?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Custer.

BARBARA NOVAK: Custer. Heh, the long-haired guy. There's a great photograph of him in the National Portrait Gallery. There is this one place where all the men fell, Custer's Last Stand, which is blocked off, as you may know.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I've been there.

BARBARA NOVAK: Isn't that wonderful. Well, then we went to visit some of the Crows and they started telling stories about him. It was just hilarious.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well the Crows will tell you to this day—. I was shocked when we got to Custer's Last Stand hill because I was with Kathy, who doesn't know the West well at all, and it's literally right next to the interstate highway. I-25 goes up there and you pull off. You stop at this Crow shop and buy your fry bread and souvenirs, and then you go into the park area.

But there were some Crows there and they wanted us to understand that those Cheyenne and Arapahoes were trespassing, and that the Crows fought alongside of Custer. Now there's actually a monument there to all of the natives who were in the battle. It shows who was opposing the army, and who was with them. Very interesting.

BARBARA NOVAK: Very interesting. Then the other Indians were so sore at them, at the Crows. They really felt they were traitors in some ways. And then there was Curly.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Curly—

BARBARA NOVAK: Curly was an important guy.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —was a scout, and he was shot in the face down at the—with Reno. There were all these horrible stories. It's sad to go there and walk up from the river to the monument. You see the four little markers, and you see the one man holding the horses and the three out skirmishing. That's where they all fell. And it's—

BARBARA NOVAK: There were no markers when I was there.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well they just—

BARBARA NOVAK: You're talking more recently.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: In the 90s there was—early 90s, late 80s—there was an extensive archaeological survey where all of the ammunition, all of the bullets, all of the cartridge casings were found and cataloged. They were able to reconstruct the whole action. Of course it's such a canonical, Errol Flynn, they died with their boots on kind of—

BARBARA NOVAK: Oh, it's very important.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Everyone imagines that version. But it's a—

BARBARA NOVAK: National Portrait Gallery has this wonderful photograph of Custer.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: In his tall boots and his wacky uniform. The Crow Indians also, as you probably know, in August have this—or July—have this Crow fair, which is one of the most enterprising national events of native America.

BARBARA NOVAK: No, I don't know that. It was very casual when I went, and just spent some time with this wonderful Crow. He played his drums and I heard all this music. I was horrified at the way they lived because there are these people—I must say that my feelings about the Indians are very, very strong. I feel very much that it's still a stain on America that we haven't acknowledged yet what has happened to the Indians in this country.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: They're coming back, however. Thankfully.

BARBARA NOVAK: I hope so because they've been maltreated, and they are still maltreated. I really feel it's a stain on our lovely country to not give them their due, and not to support them, and educate them, and help in any way we can. I also feel that—there's a chapter on Thoreau and the Indians in my [most recent book, *Voyages of the Self*, -BN] which is very important to me because I feel that philosophically, they had a lot to offer us.

That wasn't understood at that time. I hope that that Thoreau chapter is a small contribution to make people realize what could have happened. The way they think about the land, and the way they think about spirit, and so on, which really interested me.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: There has been, I think, for a long time in America that sentiment. And certainly people like Helen Hunt Jackson, who wrote about the crimes against the aboriginal people

back in the 1880s. Of course, falling pretty much on deaf ears. Not, certainly, a popular point of view at that point in time. I'm hopeful, and as are you, that this will continue to improve, hopefully.

BARBARA NOVAK: Well it depends. America right now is very diverse but, in some ways, not diverse enough. We have to really get ourselves to the point where we understand that diversification is part of democracy, and that we have really to treat everybody with proper respect no matter who, what religion or race, or what have you. Until that happens we're still fighting a battle over it. And to some extent we're fighting a battle against the 19th century.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Excellent point. Excellent point.

BARBARA NOVAK: The 19th century was both the most miraculous century in many ways, but also a violent one. Nationalism could have gone in the wrong direction, and maybe has. I'm not a nationalist but I am a globalist, I guess. I do feel that it is best for America to continue to be the great democracy that welcomes everybody.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, one wonders, specifically today, at this point, with the government shut down, whether the Union did in fact win the Civil War?

BARBARA NOVAK: You can really ask that. You really can ask that. It sounds like for the past six years we've been fighting it all over again.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: In a lot of ways we have.

BARBARA NOVAK: Yes. And I think that it may win demographically. It may work itself out demographically, but at this particular point in American history, it's really a sad commentary on the way some people interpret what America is.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Going back to your years at Harvard, when you discovered Heade and Lane, and hearing about your travels, I'm curious to know, did you go up to Cape Ann, do you go up to the Newburyport marshes and sort of stalk around the motifs these artists—

BARBARA NOVAK: Oh yes, yes. I've been to Cape Ann, I've been to Gloucester several times. Gloucester is very important to me, to experience Gloucester, to visit Lane's grave.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: His house is there.

BARBARA NOVAK: The house, there are pictures of me in front of the house. There's a picture of me, I think, in front—somewhere, in one of these books—in front of the house. And then I went to visit it, it was a mess. Nobody could get in. It was all boarded up, and so on.

Oh yes. These guys and their marshes, and their—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Harbors.

BARBARA NOVAK: —harbors and so Cape Ann meant a lot to me. And Lane has meant a lot to me. I came to the conclusion—that also happened while I was just working out my own ideas of American art was about—I came into the field when everybody thought America was about movement, motion—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Migration.

BARBARA NOVAK: Well, not so much migration as just action, action. A lot of people at that time, and I'm talking now about the 40s, a time in the 40s, people were talking about how America was motion, and the activity of it all.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: A nation on the move.

BARBARA NOVAK: A nation on the move, motion in every conceivable industrial way, and so on and so forth. I felt that it went deeper, was quiet and repose, and that that was under the other. And that's what brought me to Luminism as a way of finding that repose in the art, and finding a kind of spirit that I felt was really the main spirit.

I remember when the Hare Krishna people came along and I thought that it was interesting that Americans were looking for spirit. And I think they still are. I consider this something that has happened since Darwin.

That once Darwin knocked a few of those religious posts over, that they still wanted spirit. I still feel they do. I feel that that's something that American civilization is looking for and not really finding—or the culture.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Evolution didn't disprove the existence of God, it just offered—

BARBARA NOVAK: Well, it tampered with it.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It tampered with it. But the idea of some kind of spirituality, something that abides in nature and abides in the light, in the effects of weather, in space, in the experience of these things.

BARBARA NOVAK: Yes, exactly. I think that what is going on now is even more of the same. There are so many atheists, and so many people who are agnostics, and so many people who no longer have actual affiliations. It isn't that they aren't missing spirit. They want spirit. I think the whole movement against organized religion has to do was finding something that's deeper and more ecumenical, perhaps, than—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Even times people pursuing some alternative religious traditions like Buddhism.

BARBARA NOVAK: Oh, Buddhism is great. Emerson liked it. I remember he took it out of the Harvard library very early on. He was into this himself. And they all needed it. He needed it desperately.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Or Zen, which is sort of the alternative Buddhism. I was barely in short pants, but remembering the Beatniks and coffee houses, and Zen being sort of—

BARBARA NOVAK: Very important.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —very important.

BARBARA NOVAK: Very important. I mean, to me too. There is a component of that that I feel has existed in American art from very early on. From certainly Emerson's moment on it's been there. And that is very interesting, that sense of need for a deeper spirit has always been there. It is Asian, it is not European. You do not get it in Courbet when you get in Durand. You just don't. I mean I can compare their rocks, but there is a different feeling there. And this is why I was so amused when

Kazin was quoted in the *New York Times*, saying there is an angel in every tree. I said, yes, there is.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It's very interesting because as you're saying, it's very Asian. We just made a visit to the Peabody Essex Museum, and I'm thinking, oh my god, Lane was living 20 miles away from the heart of the China trade. Years after it had had its heyday, but certainly there was more than pottery flowing into Salem.

BARBARA NOVAK: I feel that so strongly about America. If you're going to contrast Western art—general Western, the Western world—American art and European—western part of Europe-- —I would say that that would be one of the key components. That's there's a different sense of spirit, and that sense of spirit is Asian.

It's an extra component that you just have, or Friedrich doesn't have it. Lane does. So where does that come from? And why is that always there?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: That's very interesting.

BARBARA NOVAK: And it's always been there.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I never thought of that. But is the proximity to Salem and to the China trade, and so forth, there must have been—

BARBARA NOVAK: But they were reading these things too.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: They were reading them too.

BARBARA NOVAK: I don't think they needed to---—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But how did they get into the libraries? Somebody had to—

BARBARA NOVAK: Harvard library. Where was Emerson? Yes, Harvard library. He took it out. I remember discovering that there's a wonderful early book by a man named Carpenter that I read. I wonder if it's in my bibliography here?

But it told it to me very, very quickly. I may or may not have been—but I remember distinctly picking it up. In my very earliest research I had picked it up. And I thought, oh my, this is interesting, Emerson and—Emerson sources are fascinating. Then you end up getting into Emily Dickinson, she's there too. That's what interested me so much about the last book, which I think is my best book. Of course, it's gone nowhere on the market because Oxford has never advertised it.

People weren't able really to do reviews of it because they felt that, well, one person could do the art, and one person could do the literature, but nobody could do both, so I didn't get the reviews that it should have. But it's my best book.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Art authors these days, unfortunately, seem to be expected to do their own promotions.

BARBARA NOVAK: I'm not good at that. I'm just not. I'm just not. So anyway, it hasn't happened. But the point in the matter is that it is the best book because, I think,—*Nature and Culture* was the most popular one, perhaps.

This one digs into that spirit business in a way that satisfies me. I'm totally fascinated by what

came to light when I put the two together.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So this occurred at Harvard. Your aha epiphany moment occurred, about American art, at Harvard or—

BARBARA NOVAK: Well, let' see. I did the thesis at Harvard. And I did it for Ben Rowland, who was, after all, the man who wrote *The Art and Architecture of India*, and was the only who willing to take on the American students of my generation, graduate students. It was [inaudible], it was Stebbins, myself, it was Cicorsky. It was all that group, all that group who were doing those-- —there weren't any women in it at that point.

But there were a handful of guys, and myself, who were Rowland's students. Rowland was badly treated at Harvard. I don't know why. He was a much more ecumenical figure. He had done his dissertation, I believe, on Sienese art [art of Siena -BN], and then became an Asian expert. And he was the sweetest man in the world.

He was a painter. He painted birds beautifully. He was very supportive and encouraging, and the only one who was supportive and encouraging of American art at Harvard at that particular moment. Harvard has never been really supportive of it. It just doesn't fit into their understanding, for whatever reason. But there it is. There it is.

Rowland took us on. He changed one word of my Ph.d. dissertation. He changed *intrigue* to something else, or something else to intrigue. It had to do with cowboy movies. And there I was—an Americanist.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So you were taking the train up to Cape Ann or up to Newburyport--

BARBARA NOVAK: Yes. I did that then. And then once I was with Brian, we drove, in early 60s [inaudible] late 50s. I was working at the Boston Museum in 1957-58.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Were you also doing docenting work and lecturing?

BARBARA NOVAK: I was doing a TV program. I did one of the first TV programs on art. On Tuesday nights at 9:30, live, opposite Red Skelton, which was difficult.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Freddie the Freeloader was tough competition.

BARBARA NOVAK: Very, very tough competition. I did three weeks a month, and Bart Hayes, of Andover, did one a month. It was an interesting experience, to say the least, because I did the entire collection starting with ancient, and going through medieval to modern.

I found myself once in the Catalonian chapel looking at the red eye of alive audience and it suddenly seemed, my god, is anyone even out there, which is a funny feeling. I blanked for about half a minute, or something terrible.

So I did that and decided that when Barnard invited me to come back and teach with my old professors-- —I was the first one there they did that with—I went back. Brian took my place and did his program. Mine was called *Vision of Art*, and his was called something else and art. [Invitation to Art -BN] He did three years of the same program.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: How did you meet Brian?

BARBARA NOVAK: Brian came to Boston and he came on one of those cross—one of those fellowships that you get to study somewhere else. It wasn't exactly a Fulbright but it was like a Fulbright. [Smith-Mundt grants -BN]

He had already been to Cambridge on a Nuffield grant. Then he got one of those scholarships to come over and work at Cambridge. He did at the Harvard School of Public Health, and he took a degree there.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: He's a medical doctor, originally.

BARBARA NOVAK: He was a medical doctor, yes. He practiced in Europe, and practiced in Ireland. So a lot for a young man. He worked at a children's hospital, a cancer hospital.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Tough stuff.

BARBARA NOVAK: Tough stuff. And then went to Cambridge and worked in perception, and in older people—what do you call older people?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Geriatric.

BARBARA NOVAK: Geriatric work with research. I'm aware of them too. Then we met at that particular time. When I got the invitation to come back to Barnard they said, well, we can't find a replacement for you. And I said, the only one who could possibly replace me would be Brian O'Doherty. He's my boyfriend but he's brilliant and he could do it. So I went to Widener, and they said, what's his background? And I said, well, he's written a lot about art.

So I went to Widener Library, and in those days you have these big, thick volumes and there'd be a little essay in the middle. I don't know how many pounds of it I carried, but huge volumes, and dumped them all on my supervisor's desk. And I said, there are articles by him in all of these books.

And he certainly was qualified. He had written on Roualt, he'd written on Jack Yeats, he'd written on everybody. They tested him, and of course, he was a knockout. He went on to do a lot of television in this country, and it was through that that he was invited to the *Times*.

By then we were already married and I was teaching at Barnard. He says. "They've invited me to come be a *Times* critic." And I said, "Well, if you come, at least we'll be in the same city." And so he came. That's what brought him to New York.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: How long were you dealing with a commute?

BARBARA NOVAK: Three years.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well it's not such a huge difference.

BARBARA NOVAK: No, no. But then, ultimately, he became an artist and then went and did part-time work in Boston—in Washington with the NEA anyway. So, ultimately, we had, really, over 25 years of commuting back and forth between several cities. A lot of cities.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So once you had written your dissertation and received your doctorate and came back to Barnard, how then did you imagine your mission as a scholar? How did you formulate that?

BARBARA NOVAK: As I look at it now, I really do feel that if I've made any contributions it was at least in part due to the students I taught, both undergraduate and graduate. Graduate students, it was my job to seed the field, to put them into a position where they could go ahead and deal with American art and deal with it in a way that should be dealt with, I hoped. And for the undergraduates, to open their eyes, to give them—teach them how to see, to teach them something that they would always have. Graduate students would get that too, but presumably, either somebody else had given it to them, or I would give it to them when they came to me.

But the whole idea of mission was very involved with my students. The books were something else again. That was a chance to spread even further the idea of seeing American culture more clearly through the art, and seeing it because you could read it, not about it, but it. And then seeing, as the trilogy developed, going from the baby book, as I call it, this one, into *Nature and Culture*, which was more contextual. This is formal, this is contextual, and this is spiritual.

Seeing it through the trilogy would finally, hopefully—thank god I finally finished it. I didn't mean to finish *Voyages*. I intended to die before and have it be my unpublished book. But Brian, as I kept living, Brian would say, well, you might as well finish it and publish it. So I did. And I'm glad I did because I'm so pleased with it.

But the mission was to help both in America and in Europe because it would be very nice if Europeans began to understand American art better than they do. To show that we have a great culture. We may not always have the greatest art, we may not even have the greatest masterpieces—although I think, since Friedrich is one of my favorite European artists I think Lane can hold his own with him anytime.

To realize that America has a very viable art, an art that is really worth knowing about, and an art that instructs about its culture, I think that's what I would want people to know, at deep, who Americans are. You can only know that—you can know that through the literature too, from any of the arts—but the arts is what lasts. What else lasts?

The art carries the history in its own way. I don't see anything else that lasts as well as art. If you look at the history of the world, you read it through its art. Everything else is destroyed. The buildings even are destroyed. But the art that remains to us is how we read cultures. I don't see that it's any different with America. I think you read this culture and know this culture through its art.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And you earlier stated that you identified what was particularly American as some kind of attraction to a certain spirituality that's based in nature.

BARBARA NOVAK: Oh yes. Certainly nature is very, incredibly important to Americans. This business that Henry James says about scratching it you get to know the veneer of civilizations [inaudible], that's, very important that we care about nature. It should be important for us to preserve it better. It should be important to us to care about climate control and environmental control.

Look what we're looking at. How long does our civilization really last in the face of all that.? If you have people in this country who don't believe in climate control?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yes, the global warming, and—

BARBARA NOVAK: Well you know, one of the novels I have in the drawer is a book that I wrote about climate change in the 80s and it's still pertinent today. I went back to it recently and looked at

it.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, the Sahara 5,000 years ago was a green and verdant place, and look at it now. Climate change is just part of nature's processes. If we are actually the cause of it we may actually be the cause of our own destruction because of it.

BARBARA NOVAK: I think so. I don't know what the dinosaurs did to deserve their destruction but they had it. Just think about what is happening to the water levels. It's so clear that we're really heading for this. They've got the proof that the carbon emissions are doing it, they had the proof when I wrote that novel.

Nobody was paying attention. I picked it up from the counterculture. They had the *Whole Earth* catalogs, you ever see one of those? They had it all.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well the first Earth Day was in 1970, and the science was there then.

BARBARA NOVAK: I was reading that. I had always been into counterculture stuff.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So do you think that your sense of American artists—we talked about expeditionary artists, people like O'Sullivan or Bierstadt, or Moran, or any one of a number of other minor artists—the Kern brothers, Eastman, all these people--

BARBARA NOVAK: All those guys.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: All those guys out there.

BARBARA NOVAK: I have nine volumes in the next room of the geographical surveys. I pick them up at auction.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Have you got any of the—are these the ethnographic or the geographic?

BARBARA NOVAK: Geographic. I don't have the Indian ones—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: The Schoolcraft, the big—

BARBARA NOVAK: No, I don't have that. I don't have Schoolcraft but I do have nine of the 11 or 13 volumes that Congress printed for a million dollars. I picked them up for \$600 at auction about 20 years ago.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Wow. What a wonderful thing to have. I'm jealous.

BARBARA NOVAK: I'll open one for you.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I'll look forward to that. But do you think these artists, in some way, had an ecological point of view? Have you been able to excavate from any of their works or writings—like the Barbizon artists who were sort of trying to save the great oak, or whatever.

BARBARA NOVAK: Oh well, you go back, sure, you go back to Cole and you see his poem that he wrote, the one that great tree was cut down, You start with Cole, and Cole had it in spades. When you look at this great poem on the ax, which I have in the ax chapter of *Nature and Culture*, he certainly felt it.

He would discuss it with Durand. And Durand was tree-mad. I've never seen anyone so obsessed

with trees in my entire life. You go into Durand, the wonderful drawings in the New York Historical Society—he was tree-mad. There's no question.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: He liked rocks too.

BARBARA NOVAK: He loved rocks. There's no question. Trees and rocks. But especially, I think, the idea that he did this kind of intricate drawings of trees all the time. There was never a tree that he didn't love.

And I think that's rather remarkable about him. Sometimes he seems a little banal, and yet, at the best in those studies from nature, he's as good as they get. There's just no question about it.

He's the guy, if you read his letters, go through all the letters, he's just talking about the mosquitoes biting. You read Cole and you're into literature, and you're into spirit, and you're into every conceivable Western, sophisticated idea. You get into Durand and they're rather prosaic.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: He's much less poetic than Cole. Kathy described you describing Durand as being sort of, "Yo, let's fishing kind of—"

BARBARA NOVAK: Yes, yes. He was. He was. He was a good [sportsman, a good spotter of sites - BN].

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Man's man.

BARBARA NOVAK: It was a good spot for fishing. I mean, I went through them all. Oh my god, there were so many of those papers. I remember going through all of them, and—I mean, I love him, but he was not—

Cole, on the other hand, was a different kind of genius. He was an Englishman, and he brought that with him. And he had a different kind of sophistication. He was, certainly, intellectually very different.

Cole was very, very special in that way. I think he was even into Swedenborgian, and I've indicated that. I don't know how far in he had gotten, but I think he was aware of spirit, very definitely.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: There was Inness too.

BARBARA NOVAK: Yes, well, Inness was definitely. Inness was definitely. But at the time that Cole was working they were having all these revivals and lots of meetings, you know, outside, tent meetings and so on.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: He was also the master of the Catskill Lodge of the Free and Accepted Masons. So that had its own iconography, and mysteries. A lot of those images of structures in the skies and other things allude to some of the rituals of that organization. Everybody belonged to that at a certain point in American history, all the founders.

BARBARA NOVAK: That's something to go into. I don't know who has worked with it.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: There is a younger scholar who Kathy—I can't recall his name—who has written about this, that the Masons have been extremely helpful to share.

BARBARA NOVAK: I'd like to know more about that because spiritualism has always interested me tremendously and I've worked some of it into my first novel.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But it is a kind of, basically, Christian, not exclusively Christian, and sort of anti-clerical—

BARBARA NOVAK: Right. That's about right.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —suspicion of organized religions having an allergy to Catholicism, and even Anglican, as you think about the New England Congregationalists.

BARBARA NOVAK: [Inaudible] Papism.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —eschewing Papism. The Society of Friends and other things that were all dissenting.

BARBARA NOVAK: And not just the transcendental group. Margaret is full of it. When I wrote the novel on Margaret, god, she's wonderful. That was such an experience for me to stay with her.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I'm really curious, though, if you found any evidence of these painters known to us now as the Hudson River School, and then the Luminists, as having an agenda environmentally? Whether they—

BARBARA NOVAK: Ah, Durand and Cole, yes. Church was another kind of story. Why does Church sit in Rome and paint Syria?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Food's better?

[They laugh.]

BARBARA NOVAK: Syria comes into our awareness right now, but he didn't respond well to Western Europe. But of course, the way he felt about South America was extraordinary. And when I was at Getty I worked on Humboldt.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, he's the key, isn't he?

BARBARA NOVAK: He's really the key. I have to tell you that the Humboldt experience for me was extraordinary. Just reading, really reading, through Humboldt. I spent one weekend reading his experience on river with jaguars, and mosquitos, and this and that. It was like I had gone on a special holiday of some kind. I was so much there.

He is so extraordinary. And then you get into his relationship with Jefferson. He comes back, visits Jefferson, and they become friends. He sends Jefferson the demographics of Mexico and, sure enough, ultimately, we have the Mexican War.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, the invasion of Canada was a debacle so we had to turn our attentions elsewhere.

BARBARA NOVAK: These things would very rarely come up. You start reading them and you're realizing that he sent him all the demographics. We knew exactly what was in Mexico that we wanted.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, the Zebulon Pike's expedition, which was, basically, a spy mission, and that was during the Jeffersonian administration. Pike was, basically, the toady protégé of James Wilkinson, who was an absolutely wretched character, and a traitor, and so forth.

You know, Lewis and Clark were going up the Missouri, and Wilkinson told the Spanish, who sent dragoons to try to intercept them—. It didn't work, happily. But then he sends his own guy off to spy on the Mexicans. He gets himself arrested, and gets to go down to Mexico and be incarcerated, in a very loose sense of the word, and taking lots of notes and observing everything too. So it's very interesting.

BARBARA NOVAK: It was very interesting to me. And it's interesting to me now how South America has come into play because we have—Cotton Mather sent missionaries down. Cotton Mather was already interested in getting into South America, can you believe it?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It ties into---

BARBARA NOVAK: It ties into concepts of American imperialism.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Sugar.

BARBARA NOVAK: What is—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: The poor Wampanoags and the Massachusetts Indians who were sent down to the Caribbean. When they died that's when the African slaves showed up. So it was the sugar business. All of these things are tied together.

But I'm just curious, because we—a lot of people quote Thoreau and they quote Emerson, and they look to the middle of the 19th century as being sort of the starting point for a lot of things. Seneca Falls for the women's movement, and that has its Native American antecedents. And then they look for something, in the poetry and art of that period, as being sort of the terra firma for the Sierra Club, or whatever. I'm just wondering how much of the discussion were these guys up in the White Mountains, these confabs—

BARBARA NOVAK: I haven't run into it. It isn't something that came into my consciousness with them. But I think that-- —I know when *Nature and Culture* came out I was contacted by people who felt that, somehow, I would be involved with ecology.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It's right below the surface. Scratch an American and maybe there's an environmentalist.

BARBARA NOVAK: I think on some level—not if they're anti—the environmental—don't we have a department that's under fire right now?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: That's just the energy industry, the petrochemicals.

BARBARA NOVAK: It was interesting to read about fracking the other day because it may be good for us and it may not be good for us, depending on what happens—whether we get into the shale and it backfires on us.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Clean fuel but poison water.

BARBARA NOVAK: Yes. Yes, yes. We do have a real problem, and it's a problem that we have because of our industry. We should really be as ecologically aware as we possibly can be, as a country and as leading power.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: The Crow Nation are heavily involved with fracking right now.

BARBARA NOVAK: Of course, because they were Custer's friends. I'm not sure all the other Indians feel that way.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I knew people in Colorado who were in the oil business who were dealing with the Crow getting licenses for wells from the Crow Nation.

BARBARA NOVAK: It's fascinating. It's fascinating and terrifying at the same time because our fate is in our own hands. There was some quote in Cole about it's all up to us. I remember, it's in my first book.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I guess people would like to prefer to believe that there's some benign supreme being that's going to intercede at the last moment.

BARBARA NOVAK: It's possible, but only if we save ourselves. I think it's up to us. I think that there are such things as miracles, and there are such things as universal spirits, for me. I do believe in them. But I also think that we have to deserve them. I think that Emerson would feel that way. Self-reliance has certain validity. He's somebody who was both pragmatic and transcendental.

In looking over my work, and thinking about it, those two things just play together in America so clearly. I was very amused. I was telling Brian the other day, the first time I ever heard the words it was friend of mine, who was a young man who used to walk me home from school when I was in high school---

JAMES MCELHINNEY: That was during your cheerleading days?

BARBARA NOVAK: During my cheerleading days. He belonged to a more intellectual group than and I did, at that point. I was girl leader at the Honor Society, and I had some redeeming faculties. But anyway.

He once said to me, because he was more sophisticated than I was at that point, did you ever hear of Pragmatism and Transcendentalism? And I said, no, what are they? It's just so ironic that I sit here in my mid 80s now and look at my work and realize that those two things have absorbed me through all my books, which means that those two things really, I feel, are at core of a lot of American culture.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: The American dialectic?

BARBARA NOVAK: Yes. And it's so simple. It sounds silly but---

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well it goes back to, you could say—it's New England. It's the Mayflower Compact that the saints were not going to mess with the adventurers, the adventurers were not going to mess with the saints. They were going to get along, they were going to help each other, and everybody could do what they needed to do. But ultimately, there's got to be hybridity and crossover, and one interacts with the other.

BARBARA NOVAK: It's amazing to me. William James runs all through that last book, from the very beginning. What works best? You find it in Emerson. And you're saying, Emerson has it? When Jackson Pollock says it you know he would say that. But Emerson also said it. So it keeps running back and forth.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well everybody on either side of, let's say, the Mayflower contract, had one thing in common—is that they all believed in God in some way. They'll approach their lives in

different ways but I think that becomes—Isn't that an important part of the DNA of American culture, the capacity to compromise, or to—

BARBARA NOVAK: Or to blend

JAMES MCELHINNEY: To blend.

BARBARA NOVAK: To blend. It's a blend. You can be a pragmatist, and at the same time—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: A Transcendentalist.

BARBARA NOVAK: You talk about self-reliance—Emerson's always criticizing Thoreau for having everything in him, criticized for having everything in him. Perry Miller once said that you don't find one Emerson, which is true. But that just means that contradictions are a natural thing to have, and maybe they're not so contradicting.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: They're the afflictions of a nimble mind.

BARBARA NOVAK: Yes. Of course. Of course. A lot of nimble minds—What I find extraordinary is that this is really a very rich culture that we should be proud of. I don't want to sound like an apologist, but I am if I have to be. It's a culture we can really be proud of.

What burned me up when I first came into the field was that Americans were so quick to think that French culture was better, or English culture was better—anything but American. When I came in, anything but American art.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Here's an interesting question. And it's been coming up because it's clear that German art, especially landscape painting, had an enormous, and perhaps unrecognized, impact on American art, more so than people like looking at Corot or whatever, or equal to it perhaps. One wonders the degree to which art history, which was really not practiced widely in an academic sense, certainly not by women—

I remember interviewing Gene Thaw, and he said that when he was at Columbia he knew he'd have to become a dealer because he was a middle class guy. He couldn't afford to be a connoisseur as the gentlemen like Meyer Shapiro, or somebody. And I don't know whether that's—

BARBARA NOVAK: It's a typical Gene Thaw comment.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Anyway. He's certainly now—if he wants to consider himself that—he certainly can now.

BARBARA NOVAK: He is a connoisseur.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Of course he is. But the idea that, in the 50s and afterwards, was really when the field of art history and there's this college-level activity really was formed. And you were part of that formation.

BARBARA NOVAK: It came from the Germans. There's several points that you were making. The idea of German art—in the 19th century they hardly knew it. They knew the Nazarene's and things like that. I found very little evidence that they knew—even knew of Friedrich much before about 1860, when I think there was a notice of him. I was looking for it and I couldn't find it.

However, it's absolutely true that there was through Emerson, through the Transcendentalists, in general, not just Emerson, but a real root to the Germans philosophically. And Margaret, she's working on Goethe, you know. Goethe was so big.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: There was Humboldt.

BARBARA NOVAK: Humboldt. But Goethe in *The Crayon*? My god. In the 50s? You could not leaf through *Crayon* without finding quotes from Goethe all over. He was really a hero, a national hero in America.

So you have German philosophy and, particularly with the Transcendentalists being very big stuff. At the same time, they were working out their own ideas, and they're paralleling then. One of the things I feel strongly is that we have to watch out because what looks like influence very often is sometimes parallel, a parallel development

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Good point. Excellent.

BARBARA NOVAK: It's a point that people have to make about influence because they look at it and they say, oh, it's an influence. And it isn't necessarily. It's just a similar contextual development, or philosophical development—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Something's in the air, Something's in the water.

BARBARA NOVAK: Yes, I feel that.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Everybody's drinking the same Kool-Aid.

BARBARA NOVAK: That's true. That's true. It really goes that way, I think.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: People, I don't think, understand that the 19th century was a period where there was a lot of information flying around the globe, mostly in the form of books and prints. It was not quite the internet—but like this exhibition at the Met now on textiles, which is extremely interesting, arguing that textiles, during the great age of the spice trade, the Dutch East India Company, was the major mode of transmitting artistic ideas. More so than painting, more so than sculpture because it was a decorative art form that sort of borrowed ideas from these other art forms and got to every corner of the globe. Of course, it's also not accidental that you've got a textile show in a museum that is run by a textile guy.

BARBARA NOVAK: But then you would go back—if you want to go back into the 1950s that you mentioned, who is there? You have the German scholars. You have Shapiro—well, he's homegrown, I think, he's not—but then you have people like Held and others like him. Both at Harvard and at Columbia—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: The old Bauhaus people in the arts.

BARBARA NOVAK: —and yes, well, Gropius is at Harvard, in a certain way, and we had Brendel at Columbia, Otto Brendel. We had Wittkower. I'm just thinking of the Germans. And then NYU had a whole lot of them, I remember, when I was at Barnard. I didn't work with them but I knew their names. There was a huge group of them at NYU and they were forming the art historical discipline in America. There's no question. Even in my own work in American art, who do I talk to? Who can I talk to in Europe?

It was a group of German scholars, an association of German scholars interested in American art, and they were some of my best colleagues. They knew more than my American colleagues about American 19th century.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So did you see, as a young scholar, as a student, any kind of impact on the development of the field from what is now widely understood to be the USIA's promotion of Abstract Expressionism and other forms of American popular culture as propaganda?

BARBARA NOVAK: I wasn't aware of it.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: You know what I'm talking about. The MoMA and the USIA, and all of these exhibitions that were exported to Europe and elsewhere in trying to project this idea of artistic freedom behind the Iron Curtain. There are a lot of books about this now.

BARBARA NOVAK: No, I'm not conscious of that.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It was declassified in the 80s. A lot of people still are unaware of it because it was a long time ago.

BARBARA NOVAK: I'm unaware of it. I really am.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I found it to be shocking because when I was in school it was almost like finding out that Mickey Mantle had been on steroids or something, that there was a manipulation by the government of what American art was.

BARBARA NOVAK: I don't know of it but it doesn't surprise me. Certainly, all the embassies have American art in them, and that kind of thing. There has always been—the Fulbright thing was supposed to be a perfect example of how we were supposed to be ambassadors from our country to these other countries.

The difficulty is that when you got there, sometimes they cared and sometimes they didn't care. In my instance in Belgium they were totally unreceptive to the Fulbrighters, they really were. They couldn't care less.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: That's very interesting. Why do you suppose?

BARBARA NOVAK: Belgium was a funny kind of country to be in, in that way. It was a small country, and you would run into a certain amount of hostility even if you went into a post office. And they would say things to you, oh, you're from a big country, what do you know?

[Cross talk.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, it's an invented country. Post-Napoleonic. It's an invented—it's a country invented.

BARBARA NOVAK: There was a hostility to you as somehow being the ugly American, even if you were a kid.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Was that because of their experiences during the war, or the—

BARBARA NOVAK: I don't know. Once, I remember, I was riding my bike, and I guess I didn't have a light on it. It came towards dark and a policeman stopped me and said, [inaudible]. I'm going to give

you a summons. We're just a little country and you think you're a big country. The kind of thing—gratuitous unpleasantness that I ran into as a kid over there in my early 20s, my first time, really, away from home, in any real sense. It was appalling.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And where were you? What part of Belgium?

BARBARA NOVAK: Brussels. It was unnecessary. I was living in Brussels and, for me, it wasn't a good experience. But I knew what it was meant to be. It was meant to be that we would be ambassadors.

Now, I ran into Italians through that, and the Italians would take me into their homes. I would be carrying books, big, heavy art history books, on the train. And when I got off the train, some Italian guy would bring me over to the cheapest hotel. He didn't stay with me.

But they were so nice. They were so sweet. They knew I had no money, which I didn't, and they were so kind. And when I made friends, they'd really take me into their homes.

I didn't have that—I had it from the Italians. There was a difference, a real difference there. But I didn't get it from the Belgians.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It must be something attributable to just the nature of that country itself being so divided ethnically, and it having been, basically, invented after the fall of Napoleon, and cobbled together with parts of the Netherlands, and the old Burgundian region, and France.

BARBARA NOVAK: No, I'm sure it did. I rented a room in a home where the wife was Walloon and the husband was Flemish. She and I became good friends, and he resented that terribly because he felt I was taking her away from scrubbing the floor, from her kitchen duties. So you run into these things.

But, to get back to the development of American—I don't know about the USIA, but it doesn't surprise me.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: That it was not evident to you at all.

BARBARA NOVAK: No, I wasn't conscious of it really. I wasn't conscious of it.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I have interviewed a few people, like William Bailey at Yale, who shared how he was sent to Thailand to teach art. He was on one of these—I don't know if it was a Fulbright. It was some kind of fellowship, and he said no one ever spoke about it directly, but he knew that there was some intelligence value, or some propaganda value, to what he was doing, and just accepted it as just part of—

BARBARA NOVAK: Oh no, I didn't know anything about that. Not when I had a Fulbright. I mean, we're talking 53.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right. Well, that would have been exactly the moment when all of this was going on. So it would have been—

BARBARA NOVAK: No, I was totally unconscious of it.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —top secret. He wouldn't know it a bit. It's curious because your husband's Irish and wrote about art, and was clearly a student of it prior to your getting together with him. I'm

wondering, how have you found his point of view vis-a-vis American art to be sort of a lens, a European lens, for you to study your own ideas. Imagine bouncing ideas off of him—

BARBARA NOVAK: Well it's very hard for me to say because he, as I told you, he read Bauer at the same time I did, on the opposite side of the ocean, and had the same feelings about it, was taken with it. He knows my work better than I know my own. So if there is a lens bouncing I'm not conscious of it.

He's somebody who really knows American art on his own, and has read a lot of the material that I've written about or read about. I don't think that coming in from Irish art would change very much.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Ireland is not known as being a country with a great visual arts tradition.

BARBARA NOVAK: That has been said.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: That is the common—

BARBARA NOVAK: It's not true, actually. In more recent years, I would say—Brian could speak to this better than I can because he was an external examiner. The art has gotten quite terrific in Ireland, and very sophisticated. The Irish mind is very sophisticated. I mean, god, from the point of view not only of their origin, but

you sit around with Irish people, and they are so interesting. Their minds are so interesting. It's a really extraordinary mind. So it's hard for me to judge because he has one of the most extraordinary minds of all, I must say, having lived with that mind is really phenomenal.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Arthur Miller told a story once about going into some little pub in the middle of nowhere—not that he was in Ireland often, but some little pub in the middle of nowhere. And there were a few people, a couple of farmers with crusty hands holding pints of stout.

He was talking to someone, whoever he was with, and somewhere in conversation he, or the other man, used the word Bangkok. One of the farmers turns and says, are you talking about Siam? And the other former turns and says, they call it Thailand now.

That struck him. These guys know their geography. Sitting in this smokey pub, you'd look at them and you'd think they wouldn't nothing a thing except this is the front end of a cow and this is the back.

BARBARA NOVAK: They're very sophisticated people.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I'm just curious because I remembered you saying that both of you had been reading Bauer at the same moment. It's like that novel, *The English Patient*, where the pencil falls off the table. And so there's a sort of synchronicity as yet undiscovered—

BARBARA NOVAK: Absolutely. Even the fact that we were at opposite sides of the ocean—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, it's just a little water.

BARBARA NOVAK: —in beach areas. In Bray and Rockaway.

[Cross talk.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I'm just wondering, as a European, what was Brian's take on it? And was it

different than yours?

BARBARA NOVAK: Not especially, I don't think. You should ask him that.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I may.

BARBARA NOVAK: You can get him. He's in the next room. Brian. Oh, he's not there. You should ask him that because it's a good question. And I'd be surprised because, obviously, he has his own ideas and his own mind. His sensibility is very different than mine. We've laughed about that.

And he has what I call, a labyrinthian sensibility, from *The Book of Kells* And I have very much of a luminous sensibility. But my mind goes like this, and his mind goes like that. There's no question—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: His mind is more—

BARBARA NOVAK: Absolutely. He does labyrinths, it's his art. It's in his art. The difference is really there in everyday ways.

Where I will say something to somebody—something will come up, and I will say, why don't you say it? And he'll say, no, you have to be polite about it, and you have to go around it, and, ultimately, get to it. I would go straight into it. It is the kind of difference between an American mind and an Irish mind that I can recognize, as far as that goes, in an everyday way, if that makes any sense.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Our allergy to indirectness, an America allergy to indirectness.

BARBARA NOVAK: Probably. Do we have it? We argue about this because I think, go right for it. And to him that's actually impolite. Like a phone call, I'll say, well, call so and so and say that—So, he'll make a phone call and then he'll say—I'll say, well, did you talk to them about it. No, no, that's the next phone call.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I'm wondering, too, there's another parallel to explore that the—I can't remember the title, but what many people deemed to be the first luminist painting, of the black sky, and the shoreline, and the beached rowboat. Is that Heade?

BARBARA NOVAK: One of them would be Heade. It would be the grey painting by Heade, the beached boat.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: July 1863, the worst month in American history. Vicksburg, Gettysburg—

BARBARA NOVAK: Oh, well, you get into that. I don't agree with it at all, at all. This is very fundamental.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So Luminism was not a reaction to violence.

BARBARA NOVAK: Oh my god, no, no. No, as a matter of fact, well, Luminism started before the 1860s. And you find it in the 1850s, and you find it in 1845 in *Mount and Bingham*, as I point out in my first book. And it was *Fur Traders*, and the *Eel Spearing at Setauket*, both paintings are in 1845.

No. The problem with that is that a lot of postmodern scholarship has done real harm, as far as I can see, to art history because it has decided to impose upon works of art attitudes that come out of some local experience where the date is right. This is absurd for many reasons, especially since art doesn't happen that way.

Art grows. Art germinates. Art develops. And to take something and say, oh well, the final date of it, the date that's on the museum thing, is when it started.

[END SD: 1 OF 1 TRACK 1]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So it's a coincidence. It's just a coincidence.

BARBARA NOVAK: You don't go by the dates that way. You can't put them together that way. You can't impose. How much great art came out of the Vietnam War? I mean why do they say that everything came out of the Civil War? For one thing, what they don't accept is that Americans hate evil. They hate to recognize evil. They hate to recognize that the government shutdown right now is causing evil.

There are particular kinds, certain kinds of Americans, who refuse to accept. The same Americans who didn't accept that slavery was evil. And they're doing it again. That just—is the way people see. Certain people see things. You cannot go by an exterior date. I mean, sometimes it happens, the date coincides. But many times, it isn't that the date coincides.

And so to look at it that way, for anything that happened because there was a thunderstorm. Well, things look dark. That's totally preposterous. it And it's been imposed, as you well know and I know, on *Cotopaxi*, on all kinds of things—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, yes. Well the—

BARBARA NOVAK: Anything that happened in the Civil War is fair game for these people.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: The Eleanor Harvey show, which had a painting by Homer of a soldier's feet sticking out of a tent, and the reading proposed was that this was a corpse.

BARBARA NOVAK: He didn't even like to see anything but people who were having a good time during the war.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It's risible but the fact is that the army shelter tent was six feet long. That the average soldier was five feet nine inches long. That if the soldier was going to lie under his tent to get out the sun on a hot day, he might want to put something under his head. The object would be a knapsack, which was 16 inches long. So if he puts the knapsack at one end of the tent, he crawls in and lays his head on the knapsack, his feet are going to stick out the other end of the tent.

BARBARA NOVAK: Well, you see, this is the same as Durand having somebody buy a painting and say, I'd like you to take it back and change the light because the light in my parlor is not right for the painting. And so therefore, would you please put more light into it because my parlor is dark.

It's the same idea, to make a work of art, treat a work of art due to some external circumstance that has nothing to do with it at all. And you're absolutely right about the feet. This is, it's a kind of attitude that does not take common sense, bring common sense into scholarship and it should. You're completely right about that. It's something that I find totally preposterous.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So that reading, that Heade painting is a reaction to the draft rise, Gettysburg, Vicksburg, so forth, all happening within two weeks time is trying to impose some kind of morality upon the purpose of painting it. It's a lament or opposition to the violence of the war.

BARBARA NOVAK: I mean, this is nuts. This is nuts. And they've done it with Heade a lot.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well why do they want to do? Why do you think?

BARBARA NOVAK: Because it's become programmed to do that. That if a certain thing—I mean, it happened to me in criticism of ["American Painting of the Nineteenth Century" -BN]. When certain critics would say, well, of course she wrote that because of the minimal—this was the minimal time, minimalist time, that she wrote it and therefore she saw things in terms of minimal geometry.

The fact that I have always seen geometry at the very beginning of American art didn't pay any attention. It didn't make any difference at all. It was the fact that I must have been seeing it from something that was happening when I wrote that book, which had been evolving for 10 years anyway. You know?

It's one of the worst practices that have developed art historically, particularly in the American field, that you have people who come in and interpret, over-interpret. When I was trained by Julius Held, we knew that we were not supposed to over-interpret or to read in. Then it became part of the credo of postmodern art historical scholarship that you read in. And I've said it, I've said it in several passages in my books, that I don't—I believe the art comes first, not the date.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So the more, the more the interpretation is offered as the reading, the less the reader can actually interpret. So if you go back to the idea of the painting is a formal structure based on certain relationships between space, form, light, depth, geometry, materiality, mark making, the physical object itself—

BARBARA NOVAK: And the fact that the light is darker—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And the fact that it's—

BARBARA NOVAK: —thunderstorms he liked them.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: You take a look, well it's—he liked the idea of light in one area, bright light in one area and then dark sky in the other. It's very dramatic. and it happens there a lot. It's very beautiful when it does.

BARBARA NOVAK: This is the weather I expect that you always find in landscape painting. It doesn't just happen because this is civil war.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: No, but it also talks about the passage of time and that it's actually animating the space in a different way. But the thing is that if you accept that a work of art as something that the artist begins and the viewer completes, then the more you insist upon what you must find at the end of the reading, then the less of an experience it is for the audience, for the viewer.

BARBARA NOVAK: Oh, absolutely true. But the point is that it goes to the other thing that's happened, is that the interpreter considers his interpretation more important than the art itself.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: There you go.

BARBARA NOVAK: That's what it is. It's the ego of the interpreter that becomes—and it has come into a lot of the scholarship.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well is that, do you think, the result of linguistic theory and semiotics—

BARBARA NOVAK: Just to some extent. Yeah, I do. I do. I put some of it on there. I wouldn't put all of it on there. But I think that people who are looking for another way of seeing because art history had become banal in some ways, and then I wrote, and then I wrote. That kind of thing is historically boring.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

BARBARA NOVAK: But to search for ideas that way was stupid because there are other ways of using ideas. One isn't limited to that kind of specious interpretation. There are so many ways to go, in terms of ideas. The world is rich. Go to literature. You can do something else if you're looking for another way of animating art history. Art history is rich enough. But if you want other things, play with other things. Play with ideas. Don't become ideological about your art historical theory, which is what had happened. And so that works of art became illustrations of outside effects, outside events.

I mean they're all nutty about volcanoes and what Tuckerman called the "manner and method of nature." So why put it on the Civil War when they paint volcanoes?

It doesn't make sense. I really find it inherently stupid of bright people to indoctrinate themselves that way. And I blame a lot of the scholars. We don't have to name them by name. But you know who I'm talking about.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I do indeed. The idea, though, a parallelism, case in point, *Cotopaxi*. There is a painting in Munich, I think it's at Lenbachhaus by Carl Rottman, who was the artist sent to grease the paint, the terrain.

When someone else was going, running around collecting sculptures to put it in the Glyptothek. Anyway, but his pictures are all the noise. And there's one painting, which is the composition is identical to *Cotopaxi*. It's a volcano in the cloud with the sun behind and the lake in the foreground. It's not the same image. It's not even the same shape. But it's the same visual trope.

And it's like, there's no way Church could've seen that picture. It was done before Church's picture, anyway. It's just like it's in the air, it's an idea human beings are going to put things together in a certain way, the same way they put—

BARBARA NOVAK: That's natural.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right. That's what I mean.

BARBARA NOVAK: That part of it is natural. But I think, I think we've got done three hours, two and a half hours.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I have a good look at this—

JAMES MCELHINNEY 2: Can we stop and—

BARBARA NOVAK: I had thought we were going to do about two—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yeah, that's fine.

BARBARA NOVAK: I think we've done two and a half.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Let's interrupt this conversation, this fascinating conversation. There's so much to talk about, *The Margaret-Ghost* and the *Voyages of Self* and your work now. Things you're working on now. So we'll pause. Thank you so much for your time today.

BARBARA NOVAK: This is such fun. I'm just beginning to get a little weary.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yeah, well you seem like you've just loaded with energy. But I'll just pause. Transcriber will ignore any subsequent banter.

[END SD: 1 OF 1 TRACK 2]

James McElhinney speaking with Barbara Novak in her home in Manhattan.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Good morning.

BARBARA NOVAK: Good morning.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It is the 17th of October, so noted. We covered a lot of topics last time, a strolling conversation about your early life and education and philosophy and points of view about the history of art. Art in general. Usually the first conversation is the ice breaker, but that's not our first conversation. I wanted to pose a few specific questions regarding your work as an art historian, and to try to sort of, perhaps, use your experience, your life, as a way of charting certain currents in the evolution of the history of art, post-war to the present.

And I'm not going to ask a big, long—I'm asking a big, long Charlie Rose question, I'm sorry.

But I would like to know—when you were at Harvard, and you were embarking on a career in the history of art, how many other women were in the program with you?

BARBARA NOVAK: I'm sorry—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: A little construction there as the background. When you at Harvard, how many women were in the program with you?

BARBARA NOVAK: Oh, a fair number, at the Fogg in those days, because graduate school, traditionally, has turned out to have more women than men. Particularly in the Humanities, I would say. Or at least in Art History. And although there were people—I remember somebody like Ted Reff, who was a colleague at Columbia, and was in my class.

I never stopped to think about it, but there were other women and a number of men, and I never had a feeling that I was isolated as a woman. I was more isolated as a woman when I came into the field. Because the American field, in my moment—the people who were making the contributions were all men. So I was the only woman, there. But, at large, at Harvard, no. I didn't have that feeling.

I did have a sense of sexism in the department at large. I had one professor who resented every time a woman raised her hand. Or every time I raised my hand. And I had come in, after all, not only from Barnard, where I was totally myself—where, in a sense, I found myself, intellectually. Certainly did. And as a student of Held's, especially. But also I had been at the Brooklyn Museum. And I had been lecturing to people of all ages, including graduate students, including adults, and younger children. I felt very sure of myself. I had had, already, a wonderful education before I got to Harvard.

So I would raise my hand, not think anything of it, but he always put me down. And, although there was one blonde that he seemed to like, and he didn't mind her. But for some reason or other, I got to him, and he did mind me.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Can we know his name?

BARBARA NOVAK: I don't think it's a nice thing to do.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, somebody can probably figure it out.

BARBARA NOVAK: Somebody could. Let's put it this way—I saw space—or he saw a space where I did not see space. When I met Brian, who had come, after all, to the Harvard School of Public Health from Ireland, having been at Cambridge doing perception, and then went to pick up a degree at the Harvard School of Public Health. He came over—that's when I met him—he came over to take a few classes in the Art History Department. I only found out later, when I really got to know him—that he had the same experience with this man. That again, he saw space where we did not see space, or vice versa. So he read differently. He read works of art differently.

I should also say that he was on my examining committee when I took my orals, and I knew he was there. I knew he had to be there. I just decided that I was going to come along as a very yielding female essence, and I ended up with him wanting to show me around Harvard to see what I'd missed while I was writing my dissertation. So all he needed was a certain amount of ridiculous charm to convert him. But that only aroused my scorn even more.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: You said that wherever you saw space he could not, and wherever he saw one, you could not. Did you know anything about his training? Had he learned to draw as you had?

BARBARA NOVAK: Probably not. Although he had written a distinguished book on a major artist. A modern artist. But he was just—it was clear that he didn't have an eye. I don't know what he did have.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: How important do you think that is for an art historian to have an eye?

BARBARA NOVAK: Oh, god, I think it's crucial.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: How do you define having an eye?

BARBARA NOVAK: I think having an eye—although I'd probably be hard put to tell you exactly what I mean by that—I think having an eye is the most important thing an art historian can have.

I was trained, by Held, in a very crazy way. Because he would stop me in the hall with a handful of papers and photographs of works of art from, mostly 15th, 16th, and 17th, Northern, and he'd say—Where's this from? Where is this from? Can you date it? Who did this?

And he had me so terrified that I spend all my time in the Barnard Library, going over these black and white plates that you would get in these great big German books that I couldn't read, anyway, hardly. I trained my eye, or he trained my eye. So that—I remember when I did get to Harvard—in a class that Rosenberg was running on connoisseurship—I think I told you this, about the two Van Goghs that he put on the screen? No?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I don't think so.

BARBARA NOVAK: Maybe not. He put two drawings by Van Gogh on the screen, and he said, which one is Van Gogh, and which one is the forgery? The entire class voted one way, I voted the other. And I was right because my eye had been trained, and I saw differences, spatially, in the surface, where Van Gogh had really entered the space from plane to plane. The person who was copying him, or cloning him, whatever—forging him—had just done a lot of surface activity.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So, Held was really teaching you how to be discerning. Not just to identify style, technique, subject matter.

BARBARA NOVAK: To read style. To read it—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: To read it.

BARBARA NOVAK: Through the, I would say, the artistic essence that contained it. I mean, there is such a thing—[inaudible] that's the first time I've ever even used the term—But there is an artistic essence that is personal and specific to its author, in the same way that handwriting is, and I believe that the eye can be trained, with enough comparisons and enough experience to recognize that. And that's connoisseurship. That's why I would trust the connoisseur's eye very often more than a lot of physical tests that they run.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I think a lot of people try to sort of acquire some taxonomic identification skills, without necessarily being able to enter the experience of the work of art, and be critical of it by inhabiting it intellectually. Mentally.

BARBARA NOVAK: Yes, exactly, and visually.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And so, learning to do that. So, maybe having an eye is the capacity to do that.

BARBARA NOVAK: I think so. I think that's what makes a great connoisseur. And there's a tremendous amount of experience involved.

For example, when I was teaching—of course I had learned this—Harvard, for example, had a dumb method of making you look through all the plates, and you knew that they were going to be—you were going to be tested on something that was in that pot.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

BARBARA NOVAK: So people were memorizing them. I never allowed my students to do that. When I did an introductory course, they had to look at something they'd never seen before, and identify it. And consequently, I had generations of freshman art historians driving the library mad, because they took out every single book with plates, and in the library, at that particular time, that's all you had were these big, thick books of plates. The librarians were going berserk when I had an exam, because they would all be studying those plates.

But their eyes were trained, and to this day I meet former students in the street who tell me how much it means to them, because they go all over the world, and they know what they're looking at.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I remember, at Yale and Street Hall, they had these—when I was there—they had these black and white images on these big cardboard—

BARBARA NOVAK: Cards, yes. That's right.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —and they would put them up. There was a little, sort of, easel shelf around the wall, and they would just lay them out there, and that was the prep for the exam. You'd commit this to memory and hopefully be able to identify.

BARBARA NOVAK: Something. You would see a figure leaning over, or something—or a crack in the picture, or whatever you saw.

No, and I didn't allow that. I came out, finally—when I was teaching, myself—against rote memorization, anyway, because when I was in college I discovered that if I didn't know anything about the subject, all I had to do was memorize the whole book. And when I got to the exam, I was literally, mentally, turning the pages in the book. I would lose that 24 hours after the exam. So I knew that kind of knowledge was no good.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It was not durable memory.

BARBARA NOVAK: No. And it was not worthwhile. It was false. And even though I had ended up as a summa when I graduated, I knew how I had had to get those grades, and I resolved that I would never let my students do that. So I'm very opposed to that kind of teaching or learning.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So, opposed, by extension too, to any kind of doctrine of—I mean, a lot of teachers will sort of try to promote a method as their branded method.

BARBARA NOVAK: Yes. I guess, in a sense, I have a method, because I believe in teaching people how to read and see. And that was my method. It is true that no two eyes are the same. No two sensibilities are the same. In very many cases, with my own students, I wanted them to find their own way. I did have a methodology that meant I wanted to show them the way my mind worked, but not necessarily to be a clone of me.

I didn't really appreciate it when they did turn out to be clones. I wanted them to find their own mind, and use it. But to use their mind in the way that I demonstrated I was trying to use mine. And that was very important to me.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: When I interviewed William Bailey, he recalled Albers dealing with the one or two students every year who predictably would try to imitate Albers's work as a way of seeking approval from the teacher, I suppose, or making a connection with a teacher. And he would say, "Don't paint like me, be like me."

BARBARA NOVAK: That's right. This was my philosophy, too. Be like me, in the sense that I'm showing you how I make my mind work—my sensibility work. See if you can make yours work, that works for you.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So, in what other ways, when you were at Harvard, did you experience discrimination based on gender?

BARBARA NOVAK: Well, it's curious. Years, years later, when I was already a professor, a colleague of mine, Dan Aaron, who was a noted professor of Literature, and had become a friend, asked me to come join some seminar in American culture that he was having. And I was already—oh, it must have been the 80s—I'd been teaching for a long time—since 58.

I was boarded, so to speak. I stayed overnight at a Radcliffe dorm. And, literally, I was besieged by Radcliffe women who cried on my shoulder. This is the 80s, this is post-Betty Friedan. This is well into the Women's Movement—about how sexist their professors were at Harvard. I found the same

thing at Columbia, for the women. Even Columbia women. And here we had a situation where Barnard and Columbia were joined in classes. I didn't know which was a Columbia woman, and which was a Barnard woman when they took my course. Columbia men, as well.

It was still there. It has been there, in the Ivys. I don't know about other colleges, because I only know Harvard and Columbia, really. But there has been an enormous amount of male sexism in academia, I would say.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Did you ever talk to Charlie Bergman about Harvard?

BARBARA NOVAK: No.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Because he—I think he's class of 1953. So he would have graduated, I guess, before you were there.

BARBARA NOVAK: No, I was just there.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Just there. That's what I'm thinking.

BARBARA NOVAK: Let's see, I was there '52 to '53, and then I went to Belgium '53 to '54.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Okay, so you were at Harvard the last year that Charlie was at Harvard.

BARBARA NOVAK: Yes. And graduate school.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: He recalled a story about being punched for the Porcellian Club, one of these—you know, the Porcellian Club?

BARBARA NOVAK: No.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: This is—there are these elite social clubs at Harvard.

BARBARA NOVAK: Oh, like Skull and Bones?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yes, so, what do they call them? They're like—anyway, but the top of the heap was—or is—the Porcellian Club, which was very exclusive. He had an experience with being approached about membership, and they called it *punching*, because you would be invited to a punch cocktail party. And he declined to go, ultimately. Or he declined to—or he was no longer pursued because he refused to deny that he was Jewish. Someone had said to him—

BARBARA NOVAK: They wanted him to deny that he was Jewish?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: They said, well, if it comes up, Bergman could be a Lutheran name. Somebody's said that.

BARBARA NOVAK: Oh my god.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And so he said, well, in that case, you know I don't want to be bothered with this, in other words, much more eloquently than that.

BARBARA NOVAK: And this is where? At Harvard?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: At Harvard. So I was wondering if you experienced any anti-Semitism.

BARBARA NOVAK: Not Harvard, no. I never—no, once. Once I was in the graduate dining room, and I heard some guy from Australia—I'll never forget it—ranting about New York Jews at large.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So, it was to whoever would listen.

BARBARA NOVAK: Yes. That's the only time I ran into that kind of thing. I never got it at Columbia, I never got it at Harvard, I never got it in academia in any way. I wouldn't have gotten it at Barnard.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: No.

BARBARA NOVAK: Although, I have to say, when I was admitted, it was a funny kind of experience because it was—We had been asked to describe our religious affiliation. And the year that they did, it was outlawed in the state. So I was given another application to fill out. But when I came for my interview, I saw that they were using the first application. And I did feel, at that time, that I passed. Because there was nothing distinguishing about me. Whereas the rabbi's daughter from the town, who was easily as smart I was, didn't make it the first year, the year before me.

So I had that feeling, but then after that, they had a Jewish president, and then it got very Jewish.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

BARBARA NOVAK: Not the year that I was there.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So when you entered the field, as it were, you earned your doctorate and came back to New York to teach, how did you find the field of art history? You were—

BARBARA NOVAK: I was, by then, already—once I had the doctorate, I was an Americanist.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: You had already made that decision?

BARBARA NOVAK: Oh, yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Long ago, we talked about that before.

BARBARA NOVAK: Because I did the dissertation, and also that was a field that was very—and being American was very—Protestantly American, shall I say—old family American. That worked its way into my first novel, into *Alice's Neck*. Because I did have a student—my young art historian—who discovers that she's Jewish, literally, at Harvard, when she starts researching the Holocaust, which she hardly knew. She had been orphaned young. She hardly knew anything about the Holocaust and about being Jewish.

And so, *Alice's Neck* was really a book about, not only the pain of discovery of the Holocaust for somebody who had not known about it really, in her own sense, but about somebody who is American, and who was raised as an American, as I was, with the sense, in my family, I was an American. I could do anything.

My grandparents were immigrants. My mother was born in Brooklyn. My father, in Latvia, and came at the age of two, never having known his mother, to this country. My generation, my family, I was American, and that was it. I could do anything I wanted.

That was very important to me, when I was aware of cousins who had disappeared in the Holocaust because my grandparents' families had all gone in '39. And so this was something I

carried for a long time—the awareness that if—I used to think of myself as a child, in bed, and I said to myself, if grandma hadn't come over, I'd be dead. If grandma hadn't left Poland, I'd be dead. And I couldn't get over that. You know? Just because I was born Jewish.

So that came in to her whole awareness of American culture, American history, the idea of being Jewish in America, especially since, in the book, she falls in love with somebody with a Nazi background, whose grandfather turned out to have been a former Nazi.

So it was very powerful for me, and very meaningful. How did I attach to American history? And I think, on some levels, my attachment to American history came simply because I wasn't part of it. It made it easier for me to see it clearly. It made it easier for me to see America as a Christian country, and the importance of Christianity, as Tocqueville said in 1836, "There's no country more Christian than America."

It made it easier for me to see the necessity of somebody with immigrant roots, and some of them go back 300 years, after all, to define themselves as an American. And to define themselves as an American, in which everybody is equal.

Remember also, I married an Irishman with a totally different background. Born an Irish Catholic, which he ultimately discarded, but born an Irish Catholic. Brian and I have never even thought about these differences. And I was just so happy to annex that legacy of that incredible country to my own country.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, a lot of what is America today is informed by a very large Irish presence in the population. I think Germans and Irish make up the largest ethnic—

BARBARA NOVAK: Really? Besides English, you mean?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, English is very small now, I think.

BARBARA NOVAK: Really?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I looked at a pie chart, and the Hispanic population is obviously very big. But certainly German, Irish, all of the '48ers, all of the famine people who came over.

BARBARA NOVAK: Oh, my god, yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And then afterwards. But even like the Emmetts here—who were here from early on, just immediately after the Revolution—you know, the brother of the rebel, and—

BARBARA NOVAK: Oh, sure, I mean, I know all those histories because Brian has been full of them as Patrick Ireland. I mean, so there's a whole other history, and a whole other country—a little country, compared to the continent of America—but I have been so fortunate to be able to annex that sensibility, that awareness, to my own experiences. It's been wonderful. I have a wonderful Irish family. When Brian was ill, recently, they all got on a plane and flew to Germany while he was there, to be with me.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: God bless them.

BARBARA NOVAK: Incredible.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So this whole issue of art and nationhood—When you were beginning to

imagine your—I don't want to call it a career, but your work—

BARBARA NOVAK: Work is a good word.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yeah, it's a good, honest—

BARBARA NOVAK: I don't like the word career.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Roll up—yes, career sounds a little—Machiavellian.

BARBARA NOVAK: I don't like it, especially—especially today, I think career is horrible. I think people think about their resumes—you know, they don't think about their work.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right, not what they're really doing. But it seems like this idea of art and nationhood, or American identity, is very important.

BARBARA NOVAK: It's very important to me.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yes, to you.

BARBARA NOVAK: Very important to define. And I've always felt that for the point of my interest, even though I'm an art historian, I've cared very much more about the American cultural aspects of my work, because I'm interested in American culture. To me, art history was a chance to read a culture. I was not only reading the work—the artwork—I was reading the culture that it represented, in which an essence of a culture was contained. And again, using the word of essence, I think that's what I was after in *Voyages*, really, the essence of a culture.

That's the most fun. I mean, I know what's going on, politically, very intimately, because I watch MSNBC, of course. Admittedly, it's not FOX. But I know what FOX is, too, because I used to read the *Post* just to see what they were like. But—*New York Post*, not *Washington Post*.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Partisan fish-wrapper.

BARBARA NOVAK: Yes. But I think, for me, the idea of reading a culture through the art is tantalizing and wonderful because a whole history and a whole people is involved. And to understand the early history of this country—to understand, particularly, the 19th century, which is, after all, my specialty, which I know much better than the earlier history. But I know enough of the early history to understand how the 19th century happened—is to understand certain aspects of American exceptionalism, of American nationalism, of the place that God plays-- —after all, *Nature and Culture* starts with God—I spent 10, 12 years, researching *Nature and Culture*. Every single document I picked up, in whatever disciplines—sociology, science, philosophy, art—it didn't matter what I picked up. It all said *God*.

I've never seen anything like it, and I can't get over experience. That the idea of god—the God—of the God—who gave Americans their culture and their country and their earth. Nothing could have been stronger.

So whatever the ultra-right, now, is hanging onto has to do with that. People keep saying they're re-fighting the Civil War, which indeed they are. But they're also holding on desperately to a kind of history that came from an agrarian and homogeneous culture that they don't have any more, and that's very terrifying to them. I mean, they can't stand the idea that there are other skins that aren't white.

And to think of how we started as a country, and just think of liberty and justice for all—it just doesn't add up. They haven't gotten that yet. Certainly, in the early 20th century, there's this wave of people like me, so to speak, the Jewish wave that came in because of the pogroms and because of the Czar's Army. My grandfather had to put drops in his eye to try to get out of the Czar's Army because he would have had to go in.

Instead, he came to America. He came in, and then sent for my grandmother and her first baby. And they came—she came over, third class, in one of those crowded boats, which we just saw on television recently. My god, I can't believe she was sick all the time. Somebody took care of the baby.

It's amazing how quickly, in America, intelligence surfaces—my grandmother was the smartest one in the family. She read Isaac Singer in Yiddish and she knew everything. She would watch the politics—she always watched channel 13.

She would watch politics on television, and she would say what she thought. The next morning, the *New York Times* editorial and Walter Lippmann said what Grandma had said. Whether she was criticizing the Secretary of State, or the President, it didn't matter. My grandmother and my mother were two brilliant women. Not with the education, but with the intelligence. So, by the time I got there, I was fixed.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: They paved the way and you had the DNA, and you had the stuff that they had. And you could use it as you chose to, rather than—

BARBARA NOVAK: Well, I was encouraged to use it. Education was all. Intelligence was all. Certain wonderful values of caring about other people was all.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: In talking about the history of art, I guess we've spoken a little bit about having an eye, and the necessity of connoisseurship. And then we've spoken also about how the history of art, from your perspective, is most interesting when it becomes about cultural history—talking about the character of a nation, or character of a people, or the character of an age, or an economy, or whatever—that art is not this autonomous thing that lives apart from real life. That it's somehow part of the fabric of the society and reveals things about that society. Is that accurate?

BARBARA NOVAK: It's not only accurate, but I'm thinking that what became clear to me when I became an art historian—and remember I had been an artist as a child, we went into that before—but when I became an art historian, and I saw so many small aspects of lost histories that were only represented by the physical works of art. The histories are gone. Even the written histories are largely gone.

But there are these artifacts that you have to read from. Primitive art, whatever. Old, Ancient Greek art, whatever. I realize that what is left of a civilization if we're lucky—if we don't blow ourselves up somehow, and we don't lose the planet because we don't understand global warming, which is, again, a kind of strange tragedy—is that the art is what's telling us about that society. We don't need the words. The words are very helpful. But if you know how to read the art, you're lucky.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, a work of art takes so much more of a commitment to manifest than just to throw a few words together in a—

BARBARA NOVAK: Well, books take a long time to write, too.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, books! Books, too. But I mean, we live in an age of the fortune cookie in

the headline, and people don't really admit the kind of patience that it requires to read a thousand-page book. Or very few people. They'd rather just channel-surf and have a look at headlines online.

BARBARA NOVAK: It's unfortunate that technology has been used in such a misdirected way.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: The other thing that you've worked on, as well as cultural history, is biography.

BARBARA NOVAK: Yes. I guess.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I'm thinking about Margaret Fuller.

BARBARA NOVAK: Margaret. Yes, oh boy.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: How did she come to your attention? And then how did you decide—How did you decide to work on it?

BARBARA NOVAK: She came to my attention—I don't remember, maybe a long, long time ago, of course, because she was there from the very beginning. I knew she was there. She was part of Emerson's circle, and so on.

I don't remember how I got to her, but I do remember that it was a long time getting at her. If my art history books took at least 10 years each, 12 years each, *Margaret* was just as demanding in terms of research.

Once I had done the research, I wrote 500 pages of a novel that didn't work. And I scrapped it when it wasn't working. So I had to start all over again. The book that exists, *The Margaret-Ghost*, now-- The reason it didn't work is because I was trying—it was silly—I was trying to merge Margaret with an Emily Dickinson character. It just didn't go. There were very good parts to it, but it just wasn't holding together.

As a water-colorist, I learned that if something doesn't work, you scrap it, even if it's the book you've worked on for five years. You tear it up and start again. So I had no compunctions about letting that whole thing go, and never looking at it again.

I went back and started working with her, and since I had done all the research, the book came in a year. Year and a half. Very quickly. I just had to start again, and single-mindedly look at Margaret. And what I loved about her—what I thought was wonderful about her—was, I do believe she was the most intelligent woman of the mid-19th century in America. I loved her mind.

I loved *Women in the 19th Century*, which was one of the early things I read. And perhaps it was laying my hands on that—As I think of it, there was a paperback that had come out that. It was a thin, little book. I lent it to a feminist artist who's now in New Mexico. Never gave it back to me. Never saw it again. But I have other sources for that.

It was just something about it that made me go further into Margaret, and discover how absolutely wonderful she was, how neglected she was. I always liked to—the reason I went into the American field is because I thought it needed work. So I felt Margaret needed work. I liked always to go where the work is needed, as much as your Kathy does. You go where the work is needed. It doesn't have to be the most popular field. It just has to be a place where you feel you can make a contribution.

when I wrote *The Margaret-Ghost* as a novel, making it also contemporary so that I was playing

back and forth, it was wonderful to work with her, and wonderful to know her, and to inhabit her, so to speak, while I was writing it. There were so many things about her, you can't even begin—

Emerson was floored by her. She was much too much for him. When he said, "stand from under," he meant, "Don't go near her. She'll fall on top of you." And he's sending notes to her, via Waldo, when she stays at the house. Lidian cries when she comes because—Emerson didn't really love Lidian. He was too busy loving Ellen, whom, after all, he exhumed after she was dead. Why on earth he'd want to see her after she was gone a year or so though, though, whatever it was, I'll never understand.

I loved Emerson. I always loved Emerson. I was madly in love with Emerson and Thoreau until, in my late life I discovered Melville. And he became the hero of all time for me. Because I think *Moby Dick* is the greatest book of America.

That's when I wrote *The Ape and the Whale*. And I wrote *The Ape and the Whale*—Darwin and Melville in their own words—I wrote that before I wrote *Margaret*.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It seems like in each one of your books—in each one of your books—I haven't read this yet. Kathy has. She has a copy of it. But in each one of your books is partly one of the questions that—suggested to me by my dear wife—is to ask you about the very particular structures of each one of your books.

For instance, if you think about somebody popular—a historian, today—a popular historian, something like Ken Burns, who, with his movie on the Shakers, had sort of the talking heads, the live action still images, the pan and scan, and the text panels between narrative elements of the film, and then with a book and other things, a CD—the template was established. He basically just gets in the same template over and over again, and just fills in new subjects and ideas. And that's his delivery system.

But in your books, it seems like each one of them has a particular structure. Like *Voyages of the Self*, you've got people in dialogue with each other, pairs, people—not real-time conversations, but we imagine the conversation between these two people—their ideas, their work, and multiple pairs making up the book. That's not like your previous works, like *Margaret-Ghost*. Not like any of your other works. Any other works in each one of the trilogy. And *Voyages of the Self*, and each has its own armature. Can you talk about—I mean, it seems like an awful lot of work, once you get something that—

BARBARA NOVAK: I don't think that way. I just don't think—I don't really know what I'm doing, put it that way. Things just developed. And I didn't get the right handle on the first *Margaret-Ghost*. So that was probably one of the reasons why it didn't work out right away. I was trying to do too much. I had a lovely idea that I'd want to merge them as characters without ever saying who they were, but it didn't work out. It became clear to me, certainly in *Voyages*, that there were alliances and oppositions at work that I could really talk about. And that what I had to say about the key ideas were most clearly defined by the pairs I chose.

Also, what related to everything else in the book. So, for example, in *Voyages*, what became very clear is that running through the book, from at least from Emerson on, was the idea—What works best? It's crucial to Pollock—every time you talk about Pollock to talk about what works. What works best. This is William James. And it's from the very beginning. And I love the idea that William James hovers over the whole book, from Emerson on.

Even though the pragmatism that you see in both Copley and Jonathan Edwards, who, after all,

was a scientist—I always think of him as more of a scientist than a cleric, because I know his science is better, probably—There was always an idea that dominated, with each one of these. Or several ideas that dominated, that I liked. Like both the Ryder and Emily Dickinson thinking New Englandly—It's an idea that captivates me, that makes me work. I have no set way. It's just whatever develops.

What I find interesting—and I have found interesting with my own work—is I never look back at my books, even, after I've written them, very much. And I was amazed, when I read the trilogy through, that many of the ideas I had at the beginning were just carrying through like scenes, but not because I was thinking about it that way—in the same way that when I taught things would carry through without my realizing, because I've always believed in teaching spontaneously.

I didn't work from notes. I had lists of slides in front of me. And that meant that I was obliged. That was very important to my teaching. I was obliged to think out the problems freshly every time I met a new class, and tried to say things to them that would come out pretty much the same. But I had people who would take the classes again, because they'd want to refresh themselves on what I had said, or whatever. And they would say to me that they picked up things that I hadn't said the first time. Because I wasn't conscious one way or other of what I had or hadn't said, or had thought or hadn't thought.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Hadn't occurred to you the previous time to express it that way.

BARBARA NOVAK: Exactly. Exactly. So these things have come about out of my own self expression and the materials that I work with.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So it seems like the methodology that you use as a writer is very much like what I would imagine one of your classes to be like. That you're working with individuals. You're trying to find structure that's going to make the idea work.

BARBARA NOVAK: That's right.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: As opposed to building a structure that works and loading it up with ideas.

BARBARA NOVAK: No, it's always trying to find a structure. And, as a matter of fact, *American Painting of the Nineteenth Century* came about because I had figured this out about American art on my own, essentially. I never had any classes in American art, really. I had Ben Rowland, *Art in East and West*, and I wrote my dissertation for Ben Rowland, but he didn't really teach me American art. So it was almost an order of didactic when I came to the American art. I think there was something at Columbia that I sat in on, by Upjohn, as I remember it. I don't remember what it even was about.

I was self-taught, and I was figuring it out. I was figuring out what I could about it, to transmit to other people. And when I wrote the book, it literally was—I hoped—I remember sitting down and writing at a typewriter—that I was trying to do my class again. I was trying to do it as though it was my class. And that book got written that way.

Nature and Culture got written differently, because by then I had begun to understand that context was so important. I had done so much research, and there was so much research left that I hadn't included in the first book. I just went into context much more deeply.

When I got to *Voyages* what I really felt was I was looking for an essence that would override everything. A spiritual essence—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So you went to the original voices and paired them up.

BARBARA NOVAK: Yes, yes, to them. To those people. Yes, because they were the people who most defined things that were much less defined in other figures, but defined in such a way that I could pair them. That I could put Charles Olson and Pollock together. that I could put Emily and Ryder together. They worked. They worked as pairs.

And certainly as far as Thoreau goes—Thoreau and the Indian Self—I read through his Indian books, and, as we discussed last time, I feel very strongly about the whole Indian problem in America, which is just ghastly. Ghastly. It's a real stain on the American psyche, and has been, and still is. It's overlooked, in a sense. Until we give the Indian nation the respect and the esteem they deserve—which is kind of hard to do because most people see them as being drunk, or being this, or being that. They don't see them for what they have been, or what their philosophy is—the philosophy of nature.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I have a friend I haven't seen in years. We exchange correspondence occasionally, named Edgar Heap of Birds, who is a Cheyenne elder now. Many years ago, he did a billboard outside of Derry, in Ireland, that said-- "Peace. Respect Irish homelands. No more kingdoms. No more kings." And he was warned by people that if he were to put that up that it would be vandalized. Nothing happened to it. It just stood there for six months, or however long it was, and no harm came into it. No mural painted over it. No bullet holes or anything.

And he observed, actually—just to go back to Ireland—He observed that Ireland was the only country in Europe where he felt the least bit at home, because of its sense of antiquity, and mythology, and the importance of nature, and commemorate pride.

BARBARA NOVAK: Precisely. I feel that way about Ireland, too. Brian and I used to trail around early in our marriage, looking for old undiscovered forts. Go into a field and say, I see something in that field. We'd go into the field and find something, and the sense always of the dirt under my feet was so important to me. Sense of the land was so important to me. It's filled with myth and history, and it's just a wonderful place.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: When we were leaving here last Thursday, last Tuesday, I should say—you showed me one of the volumes of the geographic survey, these marvelous illustrations and expeditionary artists and—

There is that the whole dimension of American Art that you haven't written about that much.

BARBARA NOVAK: No. But, actually there's more—most of my colleagues hadn't written about it at all when I started. When I did *Nature and Culture*, and I did chapters on exploration, I think, if you look into the literature, you'll find that it was hardly in the major books in the field. And I think I told you about my experience with the Milwaukee, Wisconsin group that I traveled with, which was very important to me. Swimming in Pyramid Lake, and trailing after Timothy O'Sullivan.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right. University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee—the American Center for Geography.

BARBARA NOVAK: Whatever they were from. They had set it up. That was truly a great experience to sit on top of Humboldt Mountain, and wait, as I think I said, they came back with a piece of karnak for me.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: That's right. That's right.

BARBARA NOVAK: I still have that. It meant a great deal to me because there are two parts of the country that I absolutely adore. One is New England, where for some reason or other I have always felt totally at home. I still don't know. I've had people say I must have in some earlier life been a New Englander, who knows? New England Jew. Whatever. I have no idea.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: They had them. They've got them.

BARBARA NOVAK: But I certainly always felt at home with Transcendentalism from the first moment that I encountered it. And of course I am a Spiritualist. So that makes a difference, too.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, Congregationalism certainly has a very strong identification with the Old Testament more than the New, I think.

BARBARA NOVAK: Does it?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I think so. It's a very—just look at the names. Obadiah—

BARBARA NOVAK: Jeremiah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Jeremiah, and of course there's always Charity, Patience, Fortitude.

BARBARA NOVAK: Yes. But I always felt very, very strongly attached to New England, and to New England thought. The other thing was the five billion years that you find when you go out to Utah. And Brian and I were in Utah—I think I told you this story about Mormons, traveling with this Mormon academic couple.

And the thing I love about them is they kept talking about family. My mother did this. My mother did that. In New York, nobody talks about their family. That's—you don't mention family. You just don't. Or religion, for that matter. But there we were, talking about it. Of course, they wanted to adopt me. I didn't like that, either.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: They wanted to convert you.

BARBARA NOVAK: Oh, convert me, yes. But they loved me. They loved me. I was Jewish, that was great.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Adrienne was out there recently—Adrienne Bell and her husband. And she was sort of nonplussed, I guess was the word, when they went to a reception and were served milk.

BARBARA NOVAK: Why?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well because there's no wine, there's no coffee.

BARBARA NOVAK: Of course. Yes. Because Brian and I had that. We went to Brigham Young first. He did a lovely rope installation, *Michael's Corner*, which was dedicated to his father, Michael. And I talked about Bierstadt. The deal was that then they would take us out into the landscape. I got to that five billion year landscape—I couldn't believe it. It was so moving to me.

I think one of the most powerful nature experiences—landscape experiences that I've ever had, and that was comparatively recent in my life. So, when I say comparatively recent, that's 20 years. That's recent for me.

But those two parts of the country have always intrigued me. When I was teaching in Wyoming, and

I went to Yosemite with my class, and I discovered the fact that the crust of the Earth was like forty miles thinner there. And the realization that that's how they got to Hell. That's how they got to the fires of Hell. Those ideas, and so on. It's so meaningful. There's nothing like American nature. And I've been all through Europe with Brian. All through Western Europe. It's just something else.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Seems like a lot of interest in expeditionary art, and people like Catlin, or people like Alfred Jacob Miller, who was not really an explorer. He was more with the fur trade. But certainly, Bierstadt was on the Lander expedition, and then later, Moran and O'Sullivan accompanied other expeditions.

Seems like a lot of the scholarship of that work by those artists has been conducted by artists within the realm of Western art as opposed to American art.

BARBARA NOVAK: That's true.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And do you see—perhaps a rhetorical question, but—how could you imagine that distinction being sort of dissolved. How they could get merged into a bigger discussion.

BARBARA NOVAK: I tried to do that. I think that's why I treated *Nature and Cultures* the way I did. And the reason I did so for the Indians the way I did. Especially for the Indians because I hoped that people would see, philosophically, what the Indians had to offer. So much more than even the Asians—certainly the Transcendentalists didn't recognize that, which is too bad.

But I think that was one of the reasons I did that. When I was working that way, there were very few of my colleagues who were working in a similar way in a general book. There were these independent studies. There was Goetzmann, who I loved and who I knew and who I respected tremendously. And I read his *Expiration and Empire*—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Great book.

BARBARA NOVAK: Great book. And he was a great man. I had contact with him. He was the one who brought me out. After *Nature and Culture*, I think he brought me to some sort of symposium in Boise. And they were amazed that I hadn't traveled further West. I had gone to California, but I didn't know what was in between. Because they felt I had written so convincingly in *Nature and Culture*. But that was out of research, really. Research can do an awful lot for you. You can find out so much just by the proper research. That you feel as though you've been there. You don't have to have gone.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well I think if you do that, I mean, anywhere I go for the first time, I always read everything I can about it because I don't want to have to be there and be clueless, and then go home and say, oh gee, I wish I had done this and that. So maybe it helps, before you get boots on the ground, that you actually—

BARBARA NOVAK: You can learn a lot.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Learn a lot through—the same way that people in the East were reading these volumes that you have over there on the shelf. And then imagining—

BARBARA NOVAK: And looking at the illustrations.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: What Spanish Peaks really looks like. And of course, the romance of exploration as told through tales by John C. Fremont and Kit Carson, who had a great, great one

liner. He said, "There's no such thing as an Indian."

BARBARA NOVAK: Wow.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: When asked to explain, he said, well, you've got hundreds of different nations, and they all speak their own language.

BARBARA NOVAK: Oh yes, and that's one of the great difficulties of dealing with it. People say, how can you talk about the Plains when there are other groups that aren't like the Plains at all. But there was this wonderful exhibition called *Circles* some years ago. And it's mentioned, definitely in *Voyages*. and it did show that there were certain uniting factors.

Also, it was interesting to me, with the anthropologists in the art history department at Columbia, and they start talking about Native Americans, and I was talking about Indians, and they said, you shouldn't use that word. And I said, why shouldn't I? The Indians prefer it, as they do.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: They call themselves Indians, mostly.

BARBARA NOVAK: Yes, yes. They don't like the other. They don't especially like the other. So, I mean, I wasn't being pejorative when I was calling them Indians. I was honoring their own sense of themselves.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, it's like Martin Luther King talking about the harm done by Northeastern liberals who don't really understand the black experience, and think that they're trying to help it in some way by being politically correct, or whatever. But yes, it's a very complex and troubling—

BARBARA NOVAK: It's troubling, but the *Circle* thing is about self. And it is about wholeness. And it's Jungian. That's what the Indians were so much, and are so much about—the wholeness of all beings. And, philosophically, it's a shame. It isn't really their fault because everything was so private and hidden, and they didn't want the early white missionaries and so on to know what they were doing in their special councils, and so on, and philosophically—it was hidden from the white people who wrote about them early on. So consequently, we didn't know.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oddly, the Pueblo people maintain the kiva societies. And kivas are next to the churches, and the priests tolerated the kivas and the kiva mysteries remained the kiva mysteries, and they live side by side. It's kind of binary. Hybrid.

BARBARA NOVAK: Yes. I spent years trying to research more of it than I actually got at. It's very hard to—I wish I had known more Indians than I did know.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Their lips are sealed when it comes to those things.

BARBARA NOVAK: Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I remember being in the Rio Grande Valley, I think, at Santa Clara, talking to a potter. I'd been hiking up in Ottowi Mesa, and found a pottery shard, which I'd put my pocket. And I got home, and it was painted in very much a Chacoan style, and I asked this man, who was my age exactly—the same year, same day of birth—and I asked him, I said, take a look at this.

He said, oh, yes, you got that at—I said, yeah, right. And I said, you know, it looks very Chacoan. What do you know about the relationship between your people and Chaco Canyon? And he said, nobody speaks of it. He said, I don't know. I'm not one of the people who does know, but nobody

speaks it. Something bad happened there and we don't speak of it anymore.

But he said, there's a lot of things that we show tourists, and it's part—I guess that's the result of the Fred Harvey—the railroad tourism.

BARBARA NOVAK: I saw that in movies.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yes. The Judy Garland movie—cornball, wonderful movie, but I mean, I think, oddly, the Catholic interaction with native peoples, aboriginal indigenous peoples, are oddly much more tolerant than the Protestant approach, which wanted to cut their hair, and to put them in—schools

BARBARA NOVAK: Schools.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Schools like Carlisle. And turn them into white folks.

BARBARA NOVAK: Yes, I mean, you could say that that's still going on. Turn everybody white, and there you'll be happy. I mean, this crazy idea. Agassiz had it, for god's sake, when you get even into the late 19th century, that the races were created by God with a thought. I mean, come on. You know, it's never going to work if you feel that the only way you can eradicate people is to merge them all. And then you say you're dealing with mongrels. They can't seem to understand that there is such a thing as God's people and insects and all sorts of other things.

I stepped on a bug the other day and got very upset about it, and Brian told me that he had pulled down—we were in the country—had pulled down a wasps' nest that he thought was completely gone. And, of course, he loved the shapes of them. He said, two wasps fell out. He said, I have felt bad all day about taking away their winter home. Because we both have this sense of all of creatures, and people worry about the color of skin? It's preposterous.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: There's a wonderful book about Morton—Samuel George Morton—*American Craniology* or whatever the book is—

BARBARA NOVAK: He works with phrenology?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: *The Crania Americana* or whatever. It's by Ann Fabian, who teaches at Rutgers. It's called *The Skull Collectors*, and it actually—she shares how the term *caucasian* came into being. An Austrian skull collector had a particularly gorgeous skull belonging to a teenage girl from what is now Georgia. And everyone admired it.

So when they were trying to taxonomize the human race, they decided that white people must be caucasian because this was the most perfect skull anyone had ever seen, therefore—

BARBARA NOVAK: Therefore—too bad.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But that gets back to Wisconsin, and a lot of that lore about Indian mounds, and people like George Ephraim Squire, and increase lapping on people like that, going around trying to find Hebrews in Indian mounds. Or Aztecs. Or whatever.

BARBARA NOVAK: There is one thing in *Voyages*, in the Thoreau chapter that always has upset me—if I can find it—in terms of what the Indians themselves said, when the white people came. And to me, it's still so moving and so upsetting. It's a Shoshone chief, Washakie, in 1855, on Horse Creek, Idaho, during a visit from a Mormon missionaries.

He says, "The time was when our Father who lives above the clouds loved our fathers who lived long ago, and his face was bright, and he talked with our fathers. His face shone upon them, and their skins were white, like the white man's. Then he turned his face away from them, and his back to them. And that caused a shade to come over them. And that is why our skin is black and our minds dark. After a while, the Great Father will quit being mad, and will turn his face towards us. Then our skin will be light."

I thought, oh. And this is something that I saw when I was teaching young people at the Brooklyn Museum. I got a lot of these very young, black kids who would come with their teachers. And when they were very young, with their little white teeth and their bright eyes, they were so open. Then, and a certain point, when they got to be about eight or nine or ten, they kept their eyes down, and they were sullen. I thought, oh my god, they've begun to recognize what prejudice is. And it broke my heart. It broke my heart. It's the same thing that he's talking about.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Another ironic tale is of Lewis and Clark. And Clark's slave, York, who was his boyhood companion—one of those stories—was always believed by the nations they encountered on the trip up the Missouri because he was black, and all the other men were white. They believed, because he was the only one of that color, that he must be the leader. And of course he was offered the amorous company of daughters and wives as a way of capturing his magic-- the medicine of this magic man.

BARBARA NOVAK: Just depends on who's looking at it.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So it's an odd kind of an assumption, but I think York had a very diverting expedition between Saint Louis and the Pacific.

Do you do you see, at some point, there might be some way of tying together the discussion about art and science, art and poetry, as expressed by artists of the Hudson River School and Luminism and Transcendentalism, and then the art representing the Westward Expansion and Manifest Destiny. Tie it all together, somehow.

BARBARA NOVAK: I did as best as I could in *Nature and Culture*, because that's precisely the way I broke it down. But I think there should be more of it, and I think that what has to happen is that people who teach American art and culture should naturally—and I'm thinking of some of my colleagues who will remain nameless—who wouldn't dream of including Western art in their curriculum.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But the point is it's American art. Why does it need to be Western?

BARBARA NOVAK: Of course, because this is an absurdity.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: The country now extends to the Pacific. Why does American art only extend to the Appalachians?

BARBARA NOVAK: Because they are looking at a particular kind of attitude that they see as American. And to them, I think a lot of them are Western artists. I mean, those people aren't cowboys. That doesn't count.

It is an absurdity because they are eliminating this from the consideration of the basic psyche of American culture. And so it's because they're looking at art, not culture, and because they only like a certain kind of art that proscribes to certain conventions or canons that they have worked out, instead of just looking at the whole thing.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Basically, American art that sort of is more or less in agreement with European art traditions.

BARBARA NOVAK: Of course. Of course. Then, you know, it goes without saying that I have been very strongly criticized for caring about what is American, because the people who—

I have one colleague—who again will remain nameless—suggested she went into late 19th century because I wasn't there. And she just didn't want to deal with the earlier period. Because there's a whole group of people who can't stand the thought that there is the development of an American art that is not dependent on European standards and values. They're still there and they will just deal with art that I consider to be derivative. It'll look like Impressionism. Or something like that. And that, to them, is better.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Hassam, and people like that.

BARBARA NOVAK: Yes, and that, to them, is better. And the fact that I devoted myself to the earlier period means that I didn't value those things. Therefore, I was in some way dealing with something American that was inferior and was limited. I dealt with exceptionalism, and even jingoism. I mean, the whole idea of isolating *American* seemed to them to be terrible. And my work has been criticized for that. That I isolated *American* in that way.

I mean, I'm sort of used to it, because I think, very often, the misconceptions of my work have been there. And it has to do with their feeling they want to be part of European—*Western*, end quote, culture and they don't want "America" separated out in any way.

It's different. There is an American look. And if you don't accept that there's an American look that is more *American*, quote unquote, than Hassam or Twachtman, or somebody like that, you're not going to get very far because the difference will be much more solid and tangible, usually. Not always Twachtman, but certainly Hassam, who, incidentally, was one of the people who chose this block for artist blocks.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Interesting.

BARBARA NOVAK: Yes. That's why you have quieter studios on this block.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: We have a drawing of him teaching at the League.

BARBARA NOVAK: Oh, really? Oh, I remember you asked me who I worked with at the League? It came to me yesterday it was Louis Bosa. B-O-S-A. And he was a funny little man who did paintings of funny little figures, all with his face. They had big noses.

But he was a very good teacher because he perceived my work, and I was in my late teens, I think, when I took classes there, on my own. He looked at my early work, and he said, I don't understand how a girl who looks like you could paint like this, because they were very Expressionist. And very tortured in my own way, trying to find myself.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: How did you look. You were beach girl, right?

BARBARA NOVAK: Probably. Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Ex-cheerleader, beach girl.

BARBARA NOVAK: Very brown, as a berry. Spent lots of time in the sun.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Lot of sand between your toes.

BARBARA NOVAK: My skin pays for it now, absolutely. I wouldn't dare go into the sun the way I did when I was a kid. But I always loved sand under my feet. It was nice.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So these distinctions between American art and other kinds of art, and the objections raised by your colleagues seem to me just to be more some kind of polemic of taste, rather than actually thinking about form and context.

BARBARA NOVAK: Well I think that's true. But I think that, when I came into the field, it was very clear to me that most people would have preferred a French biscuit to an American biscuit. I mean, they just—anything imported was better. There was a great inferiority, at large, about American culture. There really was. And my colleagues thought—my colleagues at Columbia—Oh, Barbara is working with that stuff in the attic. That's what they thought I was doing all those years.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I still get this from people I know, who are my age, who were at the National Academy, or wherever. And they say, oh, we can't abide American painting. It's no good. It's—

BARBARA NOVAK: You still hear this? It's unbelievable.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Then, why do you belong to this organization? Is supposed to represent American art.

BARBARA NOVAK: No, I mean, it's more likely representing taking your clothes off.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Something like that.

BARBARA NOVAK: You've got to be painting classic nudes, then you're Okay.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But it is curious, if you think about the Mexican conscious construction of the Meztisaje, the Mestizo culture—the sort of three cultures of the Aztec Spanish, and then the blend—they were able to sort of disentangle themselves from their European origins that way. But I don't know, I think this country is already too diverse to do that.

BARBARA NOVAK: I think the increasing diversity of America will be, from a political point of view, our only salvation. Because I think as long as the demographics continue to change, we may be able to free ourselves from thinking that all the 19th century nationalism is the only way to go. To have pride in America, to love it, to think it's great as I do, is one thing. But to think that people can't come in, and can't develop, and can't grow is crazy.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It has to do with, I think, individuality, too. Because we were talking earlier about how you devised a unique armature for each one of your books based on what it needed to do.

BARBARA NOVAK: That's right.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: That you didn't build a template, and just fill it up with new ideas.

BARBARA NOVAK: I really wouldn't have known how, because I work always out of the work itself.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right. So you're talking also about how you approach students, and that

your goal was always to try to develop them as individuals.

BARBARA NOVAK: Absolutely.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So you're developing your own work as sort of individual entities. You're developing your students as individual entities, and so why not argue that American art, including art of the West, art of New England, art of the 19th century, art of the 20th century—I mean, it's no accident that the two most canonical schools of American painting—Abstract Expressionism, Hudson River School-- all sort of occur along one estuary, the Hudson River.

BARBARA NOVAK: Well, east or north.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yes, east or north, but it's that diversity and that's that kind of search for individuality and something authentic.

BARBARA NOVAK: But that's also very American. That's just—it goes back again to do *Voyages*, where I hit upon that, particularly with Whitman, when he talks about the [inaudible] and [inaudible]. And he talks very much about—and the whole idea of the paradox of America, which I take up in that democracy chapter, in which the individual and group have to form some sort of alliance to work America out. And this is what is the whole paradox about democracy.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, it's, again, back to the Mayflower Compact—the saints and the adventurers. They had to figure out some way to live together.

BARBARA NOVAK: But the whole idea of the group and the individual, which is part of our democracy, which we are dealing with right now, when people try to claim that they're dealing with individuality, or individual liberty, or something like that. Emerson would be horrified if they took his self-reliance the way it's being taken today.

What's interesting is that it is possible, politically, to twist anything you want into a truth. Maybe that's postmodernism's fault. Because they started saying there was no truth and so therefore is there no truth; any truth is valid. And that leads you into strange directions.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, the whole crisis we've been just through—

BARBARA NOVAK: That's right, we're talking at a very important time. A major time.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: A major event in the history this country. So the media—I think the impact of the media has given people—has forced people to abandon reflection.

BARBARA NOVAK: I would agree, totally. I mean, I'm not a member of Facebook. I'm sure it's very nice. But I would—in many ways, although I'm politically a New York liberal, I think I'm also very traditional and conventional in certain ways. I still like writing with a pen.

I mean I don't write my books with a pen. But I sometimes write down ideas with a pen when I feel like it. When I'm most comfortable. I like to write letters to people, rather than send them emails if I can, and I hand-write them.

I don't want to give up what is good, insofar as I still will welcome certain new technologies, particularly medically, because I think that's where strides have been made. But I think the whole loss of certain aspects of existence—of civilized existence is going by the wayside.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, someone reading Emerson a week after the book came off the press was reading it in a different environment. They had time to digest it, and to reflect it, and, as I imagine, somebody trying to lift rhetoric out of historic writings down in Washington, to make a point on the floor, probably has some research assistant combing through the books, looking to capture sound bytes that they can use for effect. And there's no digestion of the idea. There is no integral kind of thought at work.

BARBARA NOVAK: I do think that we may be lucky, insofar as there is—There are two things. One of the things that I have mentioned in some of my writing, and probably—I don't know which book—is that Americans cannot recognize evil.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: You did speak about this before.

BARBARA NOVAK: Okay. Because I think that that's an important part of it. They don't see it. They can't believe in it. They're basically an optimistic people. But not to recognize when something goes really wrong. Not to admit it, whether it's slavery, or Indians, or some very bad political things to do with the country at large, that they won't see. That's the danger for this country. A danger for this culture.

I don't know how we overcome it because it seems to be very much there. Only can overcome it by realizing that it's there and trying to work against it.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And work, at the same time—work towards something better.

BARBARA NOVAK: Of course.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right. Let's take a break.

[END SD 1 OF 1 TRACK 3.]

BARBARA NOVAK: Even though I've talked about Americans not recognizing many things are evil, not understanding when they saw what happened to be Indians, and certainly not understanding what's happened with African Americans. I do have a certain amount of basic faith in the good sense of the American people at large, and I think to some extent we saw that yesterday.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Um hm.

BARBARA NOVAK: I think that there are people of good sense and morality, and I thought that the demagoguery that we saw—which certainly reminded me of Nazism to some extent because it was so blatant and so filled with hatred in some of the things that were said about the president, it was so awful.

And although people have said it happened in earlier times too, with presidents, but still.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: With Lincoln, certainly.

BARBARA NOVAK: Well they said to Lincoln, here's the heir to Lincoln.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: The American gorilla, right, and so forth.

BARBARA NOVAK: Yes, many things like that. So I do think that so far we've always pulled ourselves out. This is the worst test we've ever had, this kind of thing, because it came about

politically. Because of gerrymandering and certain kinds of exigencies that have to do with primary elections and what have you that has to be straightened out before we can manage to right the ship again, so to speak.

But I do have basic belief in American culture, which I as an American think is absolutely—I mean, as any child of immigrants feels, I really do feel that it's the most extraordinary country in the world.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: You spoke about how you like to teach extemporaneously. You don't work for notes, and it seems like in the books you've written too, you found the form through the process writing the book.

BARBARA NOVAK: Yes. It all comes out of process. Teaching is a tremendous responsibility. What you're trying to develop are a group of minds that are sitting there. And to try to make each mind the best it can be. It's very simple. But how do you do that with the group?

I think one of the things that has to happen is that you have to find it a pleasure. You have to enjoy it. I'm looking at all these books on education now that are coming out and they're horrifying me. I mean, with all of the tests and all that. I mean, very frankly, if I had had to do math I wouldn't have gotten out of college because I'm bad at it. So what do you do with somebody like me? You wipe them off the rolls because they can't do math? It doesn't make any sense. There are some of these test businesses that are horrifying, and I think people are going about it the wrong way. What they have to get are tremendously good teachers who care about teaching, who love teaching in a humanistic way.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

BARBARA NOVAK: And that's it.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well teaching people how to learn, as opposed to teaching people how to score well on tests, right?

BARBARA NOVAK: Of course, yes. I mean, it's very simple.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: As you said earlier, you would cram for a test and then the next day it would be gone.

BARBARA NOVAK: It didn't matter. I quickly learned that that was not teaching, and that was not learning. So, I mean, it's so simple that there's no—I've thought about writing a book about it, but it's so simple that it's just too easy to state. Get the best teachers as human beings who really want to help other people learn and develop and you'll have the best education system.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: What did you do to remain fresh and excited about what you were doing in the classroom.

BARBARA NOVAK: I loved what I was talking about. It was a passion for what I was talking about, it was passion for what I discovered, and it was constant discovery for me. I think you have to have that. Otherwise, forget it. I was very appalled when I go to college meetings of professors who would stand up and worry about what it said in the catalog about a course. It didn't matter beans what the wording was or even what it said in the catalog. It depended completely on who taught the course. Now there's a question of individuality. Who taught the course? Who are the best people to teach? Can they figure out who are the best people to teach?

One student came up to me. She said, you know, I'm enjoying this so much. No teacher ever said to me, play with this idea. No sense of play. No sense of how exciting ideas can be.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I knew a teacher who would walk in the classroom day one and ask everyone to look around and tell them who was the best student in the class.

BARBARA NOVAK: Oh my god.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And then the teacher raised their hand.

BARBARA NOVAK: [Laughs.] Love it. I love it.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: You've been a pioneer in the field of American art history, and certainly one of the first women to gain prominence in the field, and how over the course of your work—we won't use the c word here, your work, in the course of your work—how has the field changed? How have you seen it to develop?

BARBARA NOVAK: I think women, there are more women than there were before. I think I'm very proud of my students and very proud of Kathy, what she's achieved. I'm very proud of Adrienne, and what she's achieved. I mean, I think I've—Bridget Goodbody, who did a wonderful dissertation on Catlin. She had some awful examiners and she made a real contribution that—should be recognized.

I have still kept relationships with my students because they're friends, and they are continuing the work. That's what graduate students do. The undergraduates, there are some of those who had me only as an undergraduate and are still in touch with me because we established a relationship that goes on. And I think that's wonderful.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: How in your view has the practice of the history of American art developed? Are you happy with—

BARBARA NOVAK: Not in my field, I'm not. Not especially, no.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Where would you like to see it improve itself?

BARBARA NOVAK: I would like to see it be genuine. I think a lot of people stepped onto a kind of platform that they thought was going to carry their careers well. There was a lot of carping at people who care about the object. There are people who misjudged what art history is and treat it as illustration, or treat it as sociology, or treat it—I think there's a loss of understanding of what a work of art is.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Connoisseurship.

BARBARA NOVAK: Yes, I mean to kill connoisseurship was a crime. Admittedly, they were the most boring books. Saying so and so did such and such, and then he did such and such, and who cares? You know, those could go because they didn't have ideas. But to kill the basic connoisseurship that makes an art historian is tragic. It came out with the great Germans and it should have always remained as part of our historical discourse.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Connoisseurship then, in a way, is to practice in the history of art what drawing is to studio practice. The basic visual language.

BARBARA NOVAK: Yes, I have to say. You know, I mean Brian for example is a gorgeous draftsman as a contemporary artist. People would not necessarily know that about his work. He does drawings, did drawings [inaudible] when he started. Not everybody can do that. There are many, many acclaimed artists who couldn't possibly draw, and I accept that, that they are about other things. I'm not saying that things have to be canonically out of an earlier canon or facility. But I'm saying, you have to understand that a work of art is the product of a human being who is expressing something. And that has to be treated seriously. So I would say that biography is important in that sense. That you can't just go into a sociological diatribe about what this particular thing is. Or another way, you can't take meaning and distort it into such a multiplicity that you've fractured any possibility of real meaning.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: The field of art history has changed a lot, I would expect, since you entered it.

BARBARA NOVAK: Yes, I think so.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And many scholars are now playing a role in the public enterprises, serving on boards and you're on a few boards yourself, aren't you?

BARBARA NOVAK: Well, I was. For 25 years, I was a commissioner of the National Portrait Gallery.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: That's right.

BARBARA NOVAK: And I was then—towards the end of the last few years that I was on it, I was Chair of the Commissioners. So yes, and that was a role I absolutely adored.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: How did you feel about that duty you were performing?

BARBARA NOVAK: I loved it, I loved it. I did it out of love, because I really think that the National Portrait Gallery is special—there they are with photographs of Eakins as a child and all this Indian material and people who had formed this country and they're showing their portraits in their collection. The thing about the National Portrait Gallery is that all their shows are very contextual. They're very contextual, and I love that about them too.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, they've got a likeness in there somewhere, right?

BARBARA NOVAK: Well, it's just what they—and I don't know what you mean by. Oh, the likeness.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yeah, the likeness.

BARBARA NOVAK: But I mean they're contextual in so far as it's very culturally, it's oriented to American culture at large. It's not so much about the object, but the objects that they have are the most fascinating artifacts coming right out of the beginning. There are curators there who find these 18th century prints and so on that teach us so much. They find wonderful things—Wendy Reaves I think of especially as a marvelous curator. Finding these extraordinary things, and they would pick them up for no money, literally. They found [so many important pieces of art and culture - BN]. It's out of love. I mean, it's an institution that works out of love and acquires things out of love. And that's invaluable.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Were there attempts during your time there for people to try to force the Portrait Gallery to change or to become more relevant or trendy.

BARBARA NOVAK: Oh, yes. And in some ways they did become more relevant, because they added—and I was perfectly happy to have them do that—added contemporary portraiture and things like that. So celebrities entered in. We have a celebrity mad culture right now, and that was okay too. I mean, there's no harm in that, if it's handled properly, which they do beautifully.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, like the NPG in London has their competition. I forget if it's annual or biannual.

BARBARA NOVAK: Yes. We have competitions, too. We have it, too. [inaudible]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: That's relatively new, isn't it?

BARBARA NOVAK: Yes, it is. Brian has actually worked with them on that and contributed to that. And they have, actually, a beautiful portrait of Brian that they acquired, a self-portrait. But I think it's just a marvelous institution, because it just reeks of the totality of the culture and of the people who founded it and made it and were important to it. And I love it. So that was something I really loved doing.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: A lot of museums today, because of the economy of art and the way that patronage works, seem to be sort of at the mercy of big art collectors and people who are underwriting, providing the subventions for exhibitions and so forth. How do you feel about art being shown in public spaces, public institutions, being informed more by some individual's taste than a mission to educate the public?

BARBARA NOVAK: It would depend on the individual and how much—I mean, take for example the Karolik collection in Boston, which was incidentally a collection that I really learned from tremendously when I got to Harvard. Mr. Karolik had involved himself with the curator at that time, whose name I forget. But he was very important to him. And the curator made many of the selections with Mr. Karolik's acquiescence and pleasure. That was very, very important. And Brian and I both knew Maxim Karolik. Brian wrote a wonderful biography.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: In which he spoke of his pinching.

BARBARA NOVAK: Yes, he did. He pinched. [But not in Brian's biography -BN]

[They laugh.]

BARBARA NOVAK: But I remember when he pinched, it was worth it because he was adorable and colorful and deeply, as another somebody from Europe, with a European background, one of the best contributors to American culture. And that was gorgeous. The Karolik Collection is still major. They haven't always shown it the way they should.

For a long time he was afraid of this. I remember he came and spoke to me and Brian about it. He was really afraid that it would just get buried in the basement. It did for a good while. It didn't come out the way it should have and be used the way it should have been. But it was major, because he understood American folk art and valued it. And had a special section devoted to American folk art, which was also very unusual. I've always felt that you couldn't really understand 19th century without understanding the sort of conceptual base that came in from folk art and from people starting as folk artists and becoming more. So it was a Gombrichian development.

But yes, that's an example of good handling, a proper use of the curatorial connoisseurship and money.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: You're in a marriage, literally, between contemporary art and the history of art.

BARBARA NOVAK: Oh. sure.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Your husband is an artist, well, a polymath, but an artist. And in you're all of the things—

BARBARA NOVAK: We lived in the art world all these years, in the contemporary art world.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I'm curious how, over the course of your work, have you seen change in the interface between the history of art and the practice of the history of art and contemporary art?

BARBARA NOVAK: Well, I mean, it is true that a lot of departments think they have to be modern departments in order to be dealing with art history and contemporary art. And I think that that goes without saying. I don't know. I mean, it's been very different for me because I'm married to a contemporary artist and writer. I've known most of people that he's known. We've lived and worked in the contemporary art world. And my existence in the 19th century took place mostly with my developed students. So it's really hard for me to figure that one out.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So among the artists you've known, the list is legion—Duchamp, Hopper—

BARBARA NOVAK: Rothko.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —Rothko, Rauschenberg—

BARBARA NOVAK: Segal.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —Segal. Among them, how many of them were interested in art historical ideas, were mindful—

BARBARA NOVAK: Duchamp was such a brilliant mind. He would always be interested in it and it comes in with his special viewpoints, certainly. Hopper was somebody who really carried the 19th century into the 20th in the most productive way. And he was a great admirer of Homer and of Wyeth.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Andrew.

BARBARA NOVAK: Andrew.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Edward Hopper has been described—

BARBARA NOVAK: Or maybe it was Hopper—I may have it wrong. It may have been Wyeth who was an admirer of Hopper. I forget which one. [It was Wyeth admiring Hopper -BN]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Probably, yes.

BARBARA NOVAK: Yes. But we knew Wyeth and Hopper, both. But more to the point, Hopper was important in our lives, as you probably know. Brian did this wonderful film called *Hopper's Silence* about him and recently talked at the Whitney on Hopper's *Windows*. and we've been sort of trailing around after Mr. Hopper, because we are among the only people still alive who knew them well, knew both of them, Hopper and Jo, who became very close friends. And we were among the eight people at his funeral.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I have an image of him as a diffident, quiet man, and she as a rambunctious redhead.

[They laugh.]

BARBARA NOVAK: She was rambunctious, all right. I don't remember quite if the color of her hair was red.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Or brown or whatever it was. He was very tall, and she was very short. That she was very animated, he was very quiet.

BARBARA NOVAK: Extremely quiet, extremely quiet. At the end of his life, when he was literally dying in St. Luke's Hospital, Brian was doing a job in Madrid, I believe. And so I went to see him alone. I sat with him for about six hours. I don't think we exchanged more than one or two sentences, at which point one of the things that was happening was that Bill Seitz had worked on exhibition in Sao Paulo of people who were Pop artists, and Hopper was their mascot or their inspiring figure. And I told Mr. Hopper about that. And his comment was, do you think it will matter?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: [Laughs.]

BARBARA NOVAK: But I'm sitting with him, and Hopper's silence literally was a great experience. Because that was—once we had him at a party, I remember, and it was a party with a lot of people. I think Rothko was there, and Rauschenberg was there. We were living in this small place on West 13th Street. Everybody was in a far room and Mr. and Mrs. Hopper were the first to come. They came, and they sat themselves down on a settee in the front room, very small room, smaller than the room we're sitting in.

Then a space formed around them. And literally I, as the hostess, was running up to my friends and saying, would you please come talk to the Hoppers. Everybody was so in awe of them—and this was the 60s—that you dare approach them. So they sat there very quietly in their silence. But he was the loveliest man. And he and Brian had an absolutely wonderful relationship, talking about Emerson a lot. He was really a very sweet person, and very badly handled in the Knopf biography by Gail Levin, who paints him as a wife abuser and nonsense like that. I wrote a refutation of it in *Art in America* when the book came out. Because she had never known them. What she knew of them she had heard from us, because we had cooperated with her.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I'll share something after we ended the recording.

BARBARA NOVAK: Okay.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I understand that Mrs. Hopper was due to have an exhibition of some kind right after the time when he died.

BARBARA NOVAK: No, that wasn't true. I think there was a story that I told, and maybe it got garbled. But it was a story that happened to Lee Krasner. Pollock had died. Lee had collaborated and helped a great deal with the Beaubourg in Paris. And then she died. After she died, they cancelled her show and I've never forgiven them for it. I think that's just so terrible.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: You knew her well as well.

BARBARA NOVAK: Lee was one of my best friends.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So did you—

BARBARA NOVAK: I never knew him. But I knew her.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Did you spend time with her out in the Springs?

BARBARA NOVAK: I did.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: When I interviewed Gene Thaw, he said that his wife Claire—that Lee Krasner couldn't be alone in the house, that she had to have someone with her.

BARBARA NOVAK: Well, you know, that may be true because she used to beg me to come. I didn't come that often because it was demanding when one did come for various reasons. But I loved her very dearly. And I was sorry that she had been hurt in that way. It was terrible and should not have happened. But we never knew Pollock, neither of us, because Brian didn't even come to this country until '57 when Pollock died in '56. I never knew him, but we knew Lee very well.

She and I, particularly when Brian was out of town, would get together for dinner. And she treated me like a niece. She's the only person I've ever known that I allowed to yell at me. [Laughs.] If she felt like it. But she was terrific. Some people found her too hard going. But I thought she was magnificent, and a very genuine artist. Loved her.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: You knew also, were close to, Marcel Duchamp.

BARBARA NOVAK: Brian was.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Brian was.

BARBARA NOVAK: Yes, Duchamp has been here. He sat in that chair. Something to see, Duchamp in there. And Hopper in there was something to see.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: This is a—

BARBARA NOVAK: Sedan chair.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —an 18th century, is it?

BARBARA NOVAK: Yes, 18th century sedan chair.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Sedan chair painted with a coat of arms. Have you identified who they—

BARBARA NOVAK: I've looked it up. It's I think some Northern French. And on the sides are wonderful Boucher-like putti painted on the sides.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And lined with this—

BARBARA NOVAK: Brocade.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —brocade. And what kind of relationship did you have with him?

BARBARA NOVAK: With whom? Duchamp?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Duchamp.

BARBARA NOVAK: Very—well [Laughs]—He came to dinner.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Just social?

BARBARA NOVAK: Yes. Oh, yes. I mean, Brian did one of his most well-known pieces, the *Duchamp Portrait*, which is a 16-part piece that he did of Duchamp's heart, including an oscilloscope that he made in his own way, so to speak, of Duchamp's heart. And Duchamp came to dinner—at this table. I was very young, I was, in the '60s, very naive, I guess. I thought Duchamp is coming to dinner, well, I guess I have to make a French dinner. What do I know about a French dinner ?

But I had a French cookbook. I had a Julia Child. So I decided to make a French dinner for Duchamp, which was I think more than I should ever have dared doing. And it had a lot of cream in it, a lot of cream, *volaille an creme* or something like that. And then I followed it up with a recipe for an Irish trifle that somebody had given me—actually, by the wife of the producer of *Captain Kangaroo*. I mean, this gets so bizarre. This is really hilarious.

But in any case, Duchamp had to worry about his heart, and here's Brian doing his heart as the work of art he was doing. So I observed him, also, when we went to dinner at his home. The one thing I remember is that after Brian did that piece—and Brian has spoken about what it was like. It was shown at the Byron Gallery. And it was an experience to watch Duchamp watch his heart beat on the wall—I mean, one of the pieces had just gone to Germany to a major collector, to see that piece being beating in the wall—and Duchamp would stop me on the street to ask me if it was still going.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: [Laughs.]

BARBARA NOVAK: So that was my connection. I had a longer and closer connection with the Hoppers, who would come to dinner at our home. And they were very reclusive. They didn't go out very much. So there was a case where Mrs. Hopper used to call me all the time to talk about women, because she was a great feminist. So there was a case where we really had a close relationship with the Hoppers.

And Rothko was Rothko. Rothko sat at this table, just about where you are and I was sitting here for dinner. He said something wonderful about art and music. Normally I would never presume to record anything that any artist friend ever said. But in this particular instance, I couldn't resist. I excused myself, went into the kitchen, and wrote down the sentence. And it ended up as the first line in a major biography of him, not of course in any way attributed, but I remembered it.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: What is the sentence?

BARBARA NOVAK: It was about art and music.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Art and music.

BARBARA NOVAK: You can find it in the Rothko biography.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Did you have any kind of a relationship with Teeny Duchamp?

BARBARA NOVAK: Teeny came to dinner that night. But we never developed a real relationship with her. Peter Hutchinson did. Teeny, at a certain point with John Cage, went to Germany to see the first collector of the Duchamp portrait. Because there are three parts to the oscilloscope piece, particular oscilloscope piece. And Brian had other oscilloscope pieces.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: She was apparently close also to Bob Rauschenberg.

BARBARA NOVAK: Well, everybody was close to Bob. We were, too, at the beginning, very much. In fact, Brian is the one who helped Bob select those early prints, plates, from which he did many of his early prints when Brian was working at the *Times*. So we had a very early close relationship with Bob.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yes, one of the other interviews I did for the Foundation, for the Rauschenberg Foundation, recalled her going to Captiva and I think him going to see her in France in the 80s.

BARBARA NOVAK: We went to Captiva one time early on.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: How did you find it?

BARBARA NOVAK: I think when we went—I don't even remember if we were visiting specifically with Bob, but I remember being in Captiva. At a certain point out there, Bob was out in the wilderness, literally, for about 10 years of his life. Brian, I think, wrote very beautifully about him in *American Masters*. And he knew him very well, I would say, more than I did.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: How do you feel about or see how contemporary American art has evolved during your lifetime?

BARBARA NOVAK: Very frankly, the most interesting moment for me in general in relation to contemporary American art was in the 60s when Brian was a member of the group that included Smithson, LeWitt, Eva Hesse, Peter Hutchinson, Mel Bochner. That was an extraordinary group. We met several times a week, either at our house, which at that point was on 30th Street, or at Smithson's house.

And intellectually, that was the most exciting period I've ever lived through. I'll never forget the excitement. Because these guys were literally turning it all over from where it had been, all prior to the 60s, and even through Abstract Expressionism. What was interesting for me was that some of our best friends, who were either Abstract Expressionists or they were members of this group, and Brian's best friend was Morty Feldman. And the relationship with Feldman was acutely meaningful and powerful at that time.

He was a very important musician that we were in contact with, who also had very strong relationships with the art world, and not only with John Cage, but with people like Rauschenberg. He lived in the same house as Rauschenberg at one point. So that was a circle. And there were also people like Tworkov involved. Those are people that we were seeing in a natural way, all through the 60s and into the early 70s. And it was a very, very meaningful time.

I have felt that most of the things that are happening today came out of that 60s period. And that was really the breaking point there.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I think that's probably true. Who were your chief allies in the field? Who did you feel most collegial with in developing, expanding the study of American art?

BARBARA NOVAK: Actually, they were the older figures. I had a very good relationship with Bauer and Goodrich. They welcomed me into the field and I learned a lot from them. I was a tremendous admirer of Baur's Luminist essay. He always said I gave him too much credit for it, but I don't feel I did. I mean, I think he really saw it, and then I elaborated and changed it, but I got the path from him,

I would say. It's very important to me.

So I would say those were the larger figures that I met. And then there were people like Dan Aaron. They were people in subsidiary fields that I had relationships with. And I had my own students. And in a sense, that was it.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: A lot of whom have become very distinguished in their own right.

BARBARA NOVAK: Yes, Linda Ferber.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Linda, right.

BARBARA NOVAK: Kathy [Manthorne], Bridget [Goodbody], Meredith Davis, who I thought was great. Marissa Watts, who is now I think at Christie's somewhere. And Paul Sternberger—they were very good students and I'm very proud of them. I think they've done a tremendous amount. As you may know, at one point, if you looked around New York, all of the women curators and directors were students of mine, which is very gratifying. And they each went their own way. Ella Foshay, who is wonderful, absolutely wonderful. So they have been making contributions to the field. [Laurie Anderson, Annette Blaugund, Ellen Little, Kevin Avery -BN]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So, the Barbara Novak brand of student is one who is on their own path.

BARBARA NOVAK: I would say so. I would hope so, yes. I would hope so. And I certainly think so. They were all very different from each other.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And from you.

BARBARA NOVAK: And from me.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Except in perhaps some kind of deep way of working, Kathy to this day never repeats a course. She always writes a new course, or she always comes up with a new—

BARBARA NOVAK: Way of seeing it.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —way of, yeah, talking about art and sugar or art and whatever, something that's sort of unexpected. I've asked her, I said, isn't it just easier to recycle these ideas every five years? She says, oh, that's unthinkable—

BARBARA NOVAK: So boring.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Unthinkable.

BARBARA NOVAK: It's so boring.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Exactly. But most people would do that.

BARBARA NOVAK: Yes. they would use their old notes, God help us. No, I think that spontaneity in teaching is enormously important. And also you have to be really excited about what you're dealing with.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

BARBARA NOVAK: Otherwise, forget it. Don't teach. Do something else.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: To love what you do, that keeps coming up, over and over and over again.

BARBARA NOVAK: And also, loving ideas. I mean, if it isn't fundamentally rooted in the excitement of ideas, it's not going to go very far.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: If you had another half century to work on American art, what would you be tackling?

BARBARA NOVAK: What would I be doing in American art?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Or would you go to another field? Would you go to global art, or Canadian art? No, just kidding.

[They laugh.]

BARBARA NOVAK: I probably would work more with theory and cultural studies in some way. Because that has always interested me. I really care about cultural studies. I think there's a lot still to be done. I think there's a lot still to be done with American culture that hasn't been done yet. And I think it's veered away from that. It's also veered away, in a curious way, from understanding who the great figures are. I mean, people don't care anymore about some of the great cultural icons. They had this Luminist conference at the NAD at a certain point, and they were putting down Emerson like crazy. Kathy was there. I mean, they're not only putting me down, of course, but putting Emerson down, and this is so nuts.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Was this in association with the Suydam show?

BARBARA NOVAK: Well, it was with the Luminist show, I thought. Or maybe it was Suydam show.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: The Luminist show?

BARBARA NOVAK: Yes, of course. For them to be putting down Emerson was so absurd, because Emerson was read. If you go to the archives of The National Academy, and you look at the bibliographies and books that are taken out, he was read. Hopper adored him. How do you put Emerson down? What kind of nuttiness is this?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I think I remember hearing about this.

BARBARA NOVAK: Oh, it was terrible.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: That's what I heard. Well, actually Kathy has—since the sale of the Church and the Gifford, she has cooled somewhat towards that institution, like a lot of people have.

BARBARA NOVAK: Well, yes. Things have changed.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Things have changed.

BARBARA NOVAK: Sudyam, of course, is just one of the best artists to develop---

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, he was really an amateur. He wasn't a professional.

BARBARA NOVAK: God, they were so gorgeous.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yes, a beautiful painter.

BARBARA NOVAK: There's a tiny little Suydam at the Century I looked at just recently in the little Bryant room, teeny little—so perfect. So perfect. But there's still a lot to do. I always felt at the time when I first started that there are many, many artists still to resurrect [as I did with Thomas Hotchkiss -BN]. And I still believe that. But that isn't for everybody. My own feeling in terms of my own work is that I'm more interested in ideas right now. But there's a lot—there's so much to do. I mean, just take anything.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So, when you came on to the scene, there was not much interest in the Hudson River School. There was not much interest in Luminism. It was a frontier. And what's the frontier today?

BARBARA NOVAK: I don't really know, because I think that it has become so sociological. And I've, in a sense, lost interest. I don't think it's cultural. I don't think it deals with culture in the way that I think of culture, in terms of somehow getting to the roots of ourselves. I think it's into some other stuff that I'm honestly not interested in.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So maybe reigniting a visual passion and curiosity that might lead to new ideas requires restoring connoisseurship to a basic toolbox.

BARBARA NOVAK: I think I told you that story about the child, the student who came into my class and didn't enjoy it at all. She had a terrible time because I was asking them to see. And she struggled through the whole course, because she had been working with somebody who was just giving them lots of bibliography and lots of reading and lots of everything, but not teaching them how to see. About a year later, she caught me in the aisle outside my office, and she said, with great excitement, Professor Novak, Professor Novak, I'm into style.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, you did tell us this.

BARBARA NOVAK: Yes. I mean, I'll never forget that girl.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: [Laughs.]

BARBARA NOVAK: I'll never forget that girl. Forgive me for repeating myself after—wipe it off the transcript. But I just couldn't get over that. Because I do still think it's at the core. If you're going to deal with a work of art, treat it like a work of art. You don't have to expect people to draw like Ingres but you do have to expect artists to be genuine. And I think psyching out what is genuine art—and I don't mean saying, oh God, my grandfather could do that or something like that—but psyching out somehow a real artist, which was very important when I was dealing with the Krasner Pollock Foundation, because Lee wanted the artists who got the prizes, who got the Krasner Pollock grants, to be worthy and needy.

Very often there were sometimes people on it who wanted just to get the biggest artist around, to choose the biggest artist. And that wasn't, I felt, what Lee was really about. She wanted them to need the help and be worthy, but not necessarily because they were enormously well-known artists or celebrities. That was important to her. She wanted the old ones who hadn't had any recognition to get a chance and so on. So sometimes they were, when those of us were judging these things, there were conflicts in the way we saw. And I'm sure you got that from Charlie.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yes, of course. He explained the nuances of how that process worked. We've come to the end of two hours. And I sense from you that it might be time to go to our next—to our prandial delights. But I was just wondering if there was any kind of coda you would like to put

on the conversation, some grand observation, or—

BARBARA NOVAK: No, although I probably—I'm trying to think of what my work has been. Because it's been two parts. It's been, on the one hand, the teaching, and it's been also the writing. And when I finally retired from teaching, what meant the most to me was that I had somehow enhanced people's lives through teaching. But now I find there are people who are reading the trilogy and learning a great deal and benefiting from it a great deal, and I think that the advantage of publication is that those books are there. And so I think that there are two ways of reaching. What I'm really reaching for is people who better understand American culture and gain the actual pleasure of experiencing it through the art.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: You've withdrawn from the lecture hall, but you're still teaching through your books.

BARBARA NOVAK: Hopefully. And hopefully people begin to value and appreciate what this culture is really about, as it keeps changing. I don't think that enough people really try—they deal with the politics, they deal with this, they deal with that. But they don't really dig at what is the American psyche. And somehow I consider that a very important thing to dig at, to understand, to try to define. One of the reasons that *Voyages* is so varied is because all those little parts go into it.

You know, it's Olson. I can't say it better than Olson said it. It was the most extraordinary experience for me when I discovered Charles Olson through his book. But at the very beginning, where he says, "An American is a complex of occasions, themselves a geometry of spatial nature." I love that. "American is a complex of occasions, themselves a geometry of spatial nature." I think that really said it for me. There's a tremendous pluralism at the same time. And then he goes on to say, "I am at one with my skin." It is again this curious mix of the duality that Whitman spoke of, of the mass and the single individual. And it's important for us to get it right. And we don't always do that. But I'm hopeful that it will straighten itself out. At least I hope we can save the planet.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And perhaps a better understanding of the history of art will allow that to happen.

BARBARA NOVAK: I think so. I think so. [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Thank you so much.

BARBARA NOVAK: My pleasure.

[END INTERVIEW.]