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Brennan, Michael: A Conversation with David Novros
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A CONVERSATION WITH DAVID NOVROS

Oral history interview with David Novros, 2008 Oct. 22-27. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview by **Michael Brennan**

David, can you tell me when and where you were born?
I was born in Los Angeles, California, in 1941.

And describe your childhood in L.A. and your family background.
I was raised by two people who were both artists, painters originally. My father became a filmmaker and opened a studio, and my mother worked on the animated films that he made. In addition, there was my brother, Paul. He's a year younger than I. He was born in September, 1942. I had a kind of idyllic childhood in a way, even though I was born during the war. My parents were very supportive of any kind of interest in art that I had. I was taken to art school when I was very young, and I went to Los Angeles Chouinard Art Institute when I was a teenager. In general, I had a lot of support from them.
Los Angeles, at the time – I grew up in various places, Hollywood and the San Fernando Valley and then downtown L.A. and sometimes over to Santa Monica – was incredibly beautiful. Los Angeles in the '40s was kind of a dream of clear air and white mountains and orange groves. We grew and we played sports. We had kind of a normal life. But underneath all that was a strange drama that I wasn't aware of, which was that my mother had been smuggled into the country by her stepbrothers. She was born in Poland, and when she was seven, she was orphaned. She had to run away from a lot of stuff. Eventually she and her sister ended up in America.
My mother took the role of a suburban California housewife completely, and there was never any mention of Europe. We never knew. But right after the war she had a breakdown. She'd been taking care of my brother and I, and my father had been working in the war efforts and wasn't around much. It was just too much. My brother and I were put in a place where we were kept while my dad was getting things together. Then we resumed our lives as a poor but happy family.

So you had no idea about this darker history until it interrupted this more idyllic experience?
Yes, I had no idea about it. My brother and I were shielded from it, and since my mother was beautiful and "normal" and talented, and continued to be, it was just glazed over. But in retrospect, it must have been strange being a survivor in paradise.

You know, you mentioned that you went to Chouinard, and I have to wonder, given your father's success with film and animation in particular, was there pressure for you to, kind of, go into that studio business, or...
No. My father was supportive of whatever direction I was taking in the arts, always. But I myself wanted to go into film, and study in school, study at University of Southern California. I was taking a lot more film classes than art classes, although I was there on an art scholarship. I kept going to movies, was very excited by movies, by film, thinking

myself a director-in-training. I took acting classes with Jeff Corey and Lenny Nimoy. That was very exciting and glamorous. I was all ready to go.
Then in the summers, I helped out in the studio making drawings for various projects. I found it kind of boring. When I got onto live action sets and hung out with that scene, I found it incredibly boring. The waiting around, the endless communication between all the different people. I was beginning to think that, man, maybe this really isn't for me. Then I went to Yale Summer School in '61, and was able to paint and meet people who were really excited about painting, somewhat in the same way I was excited about film up to then, I was completely converted to painting. I felt myself a painter at that point.

Can you tell me more about that experience, I mean going from California to the Yale summer program?
I was a student at USC. I was young, I was a freshman, and normally, they took people who were trying to go on to Yale graduate school. So the people there were much older than I, for the most part, and a lot more hip and experienced in the New York scene. I knew it very vaguely. I knew about Pollock, I knew about Rothko – reproductions of their work. But you know, in Los Angeles at that time I really hadn't seen any kind of paintings to speak of, except one or two, maybe 10 in all, great paintings that were in the Los Angeles County Museum at the time, which was in Exposition Park and shared the park with the dinosaur museums and the botanical garden.
I remember they used to have an Gorky, and they always hung it upside down. I'd tell them, "You know, you've got that Gorky upside down," and they would say, "Okay, we'll take care of it." You'd come back a few months later and it's still upside down. It was very sleepy. They have a beautiful Cézanne, Cherries, a still life, and they had a few good paintings. But nothing, you know, to really turn you on.
I was 19 years old, and I got to New York for the first time as an adult. I'd been there when I was a small child, and I saw the Met, Metropolitan Museum, and I saw the Modern Museum, and I saw the galleries. I saw the 10th Street scene. Then I went up to Yale, and I was just – my eyes had been opened. I knew that painting had a potential that I had never seen before.
I came to the Yale school, and there were kids from all over the country, some of them not kids. Some of them navy veterans, you know, older people, and they were just a great group of people. They were all really excited, and the people who were running the school at the time had the good sense to loosen up on any kind of restrictions. We had various classes and all of that, but we spent a lot of time working on our own. We were all self-motivated. I had a lot of contact with the students, people like Brice Marden, Chuck Close, Vija Celmins, Steve Posen, Bill Hochhausen, who became my friends.

There was a guy called Terry, from Indiana, who was probably, I thought, one of the most talented of all the people there, and he kind of disappeared from the scene. I never knew what happened to him. The last time I saw him, he was living in North Hollywood in a ranch house. But he didn't seem to be painting anymore. I remember his paintings very well, and I remember him as one of the most talented students.

Then some of the people who were thought to be the most talented never accomplished very much afterwards.

Brice Marden, 1975.

Can we back up just for a minute? Can you tell me what you remember about the 10th Street scene at that time?

Well, I really didn't even know it existed. Brice and the guy who really sort of took me under his wing, Bill Hochhausen -I stayed with him; he's a sculptor and he's working today – they took me around and showed me what was happening, you know. This is 8th Street. This is the Cedar Tavern. I went with Brice one night, I think, to the Cedar. Maybe it wasn't Brice. Maybe it was Bill, and de Kooning was pointed out to me, and the various artists were all pointed out to me. It was a big thing to me at the time.

Meanwhile, I had to go back to USC and finish my school. I went back very dissatisfied, very unhappy with the provincialism of the school, and had it not been for my meeting Paul Mogensen, who was a fellow student, I think I would have gone nuts, because the level of thought was incredibly low, both among the teachers and the students.

At the end of the second year, I wanted to leave school. I wanted to go to Europe.

The Cedar Tavern in the '60s.

I also had begun reading Don Judd in Art magazine, which the USC library started to stock in about '59 or '60, I guess it was, '60. I got turned on by him. I had never seen any of his work, but I really loved the way he wrote. It was such a breath of fresh air compared to all the kind of terrible writing that was being done about art, for the most part, with the exception of Greenberg, who I didn't know about at the time.

I didn't go to Europe. I caved in to a guilt trip that was being laid on me about finishing school. It's the only time my parents ever weighed in. It's kind of ironic, because my father quit high school to go to Paris and study painting. But he and my mother were both saying, "No, no, no. Stay, get your degree. You can never tell. Maybe you'll have to teach some day. Things are tough out there," that sort of thing.

But I hated school, and I hated the track that I'd seen at Yale, which was graduate school.

It was really not what I wanted to do. So I stuck around, and I guess in my junior year, the museum across the street got four paintings by Clyfford Still. Very, very large, of course, paintings, one on each wall in the room. I was knocked out by them. It wasn't even so much the paintings themselves – I can't remember them specifically – but it was the experience of going to a room and seeing paintings, which were taking the place of the wall, more or less.
That confirmed the kind of feeling I had about wall painting, which I'd had since I was very young, because I'd been doing murals ever since I was a kid. I was encouraged to paint on walls in our house, in our garage. I used to make a yearly mural, paint it over, paint another one on it.

Just directly on the garage wall?
Right on the garage wall, the stucco wall. I don't remember if I was doing them because I wanted to do them, or I was doing them because my father told me I was a good painter and I ought to do them, or exactly why. But it became a kind of little ritual I did for about four years.

It's interesting that you began with a completely non-easel process, that you just went directly to the wall.
Yes. Well, as I said, I was encouraged. My father was very sophisticated. He knew about wall painting; he bought me the paint, the brushes. My brother would help me sometimes; sometimes he wouldn't. It was pretty contentious, you can imagine. It was, "Okay, you paint the grass and I'll paint the horses." It was like a distribution of work. By that time, my brother had become a musician.

What kind of musician is he?
He's a reed player and a composer, and he teaches at California Institute of the Arts in Los Angeles. He also runs my father's film studio. After my father retired, his partner had a nervous breakdown. My brother had to come in to keep things rolling, even though he hadn't had much experience in film. But he knew the structure of the studio, and he got hooked. So he was both teaching music and playing and running the studio, and he still is, at least for the time being.

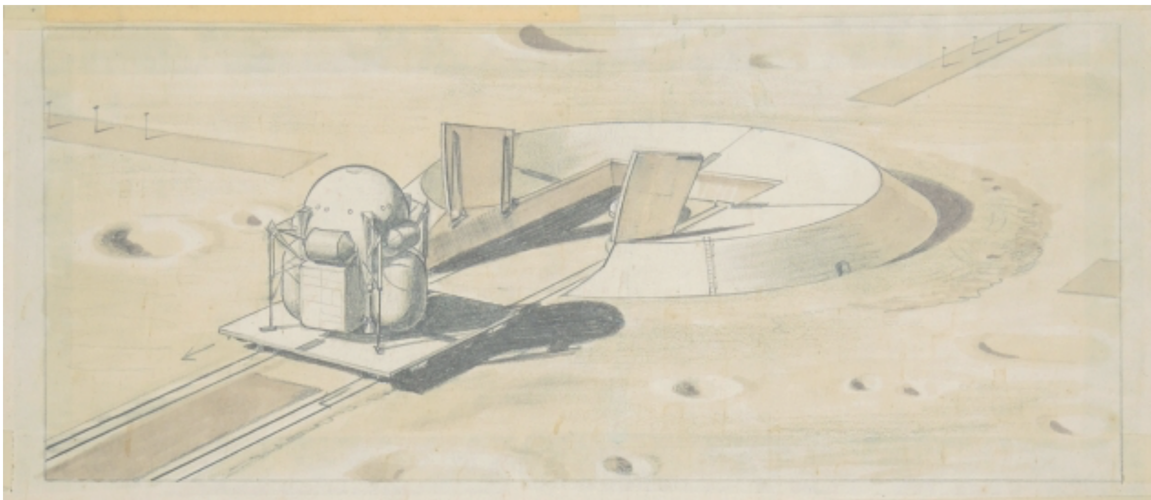
What did your parents think about your paintings as you matured? I'm assuming they came to your shows.
Yes. I mean, my father, especially, collected every review. I wouldn't have any of the

papers. I threw everything out. But when he died and I went back to California, I was looking through his papers, and I came across every single review or magazine article or reference to stuff I'd done over the years. There it was. He was an orderly person. He kept everything. So there was all my stuff, and he loved it.

There's a kind of sadness about it, because they were very supportive, as I've said; they both loved my work and understood it, up until the time I left for New York. Then when I went to New York and I moved into the way of painting that I did, I think they still loved it because it was mine, but I knew at that point they couldn't understand it in a way that I understood it.

It was very moving. When I visited them and I'd leave the house, I'd be in tears because of feeling such gratitude for their support, but at the same time such sadness at not being able to take them along.

My father, who was brilliant generally about painting and perception, he taught at USC for years about this sort of thing. I brought Bob Irwin and Jim Turrell over to my parents' house. They were knocked out, because my father was preaching concepts of perception affecting the arts. That's what they were involved with at the time. Then my father's studio developed the original imagery for 2001: A Space Odyssey. They were edged out, and Kubrick hired on the guys who my father had working for him to finish the work in England. But all the work had been done at Graphic Films.



Studies for Lunar Base for *2001: A Space Odyssey*, Graphic Films.

My father's papers are in the Museum of the Moving Image in Queens. Also his communications with Kubrick. At one point they were talking about what kind of form the figure at the end would have. Kubrick wanted a Giacometti-esque figure. About that time, my father was turning on to Judd and he was seeing the minimal sculptors for the first

time, through his relation with me. That's how he ended up with that slab, that McCracken slab at the end of the film.

I mean, there's always been a lot of speculation about that.
Yes. That's how I remembered the order of events.

Did Kubrick do that? Did he take it back to England in order to have more control or to save money?
He was doing it from England.

Oh, okay.
From the beginning he was communicating by telegram – he brought my father's studio in on a contingency basis in the beginning. My father kept writing him to be paid for it. There was a constant, pay me, pay me, and Kubrick wasn't paying him. Then it got to the point where either my father was going to continue to do the work for the actual film, or he would have to quit producing the material. It didn't pay to keep working. He kept writing to Kubrick, "Where's the contract for the production?" Kubrick stalled. Then my father sent Pederson, who was one of the major contributors, to England with the latest batch of material, and instead of coming back with a contract, Con stayed there and signed on with Kubrick, as did Doug, oh, what's his name? He's quite well known in science fiction.

I know who you're talking about. He's still working.
Trumbull, Doug Trumbull. It was Trumbull and Pederson who kind of jumped ship and went over there, hired away by Kubrick. So Kubrick felt he didn't need Graphic anymore, and that was it. That was the end of it.

So after you got your degree at USC, then what happened? That's when you came to New York, or did you go abroad?
The day I graduated, I jumped in a car with Paul Mogensen, headed out across the country, came to New York, stayed in New York for a little while, got on a freighter, and went to Europe.

And where did you go first in Europe?
Landed in Lisbon. Stayed in Lisbon for a very short time, two or three days, because my

intention had always been to go to Spain. So from Lisbon, I took a train through Estremadura. Came to Madrid. I stayed in Madrid for about three months. I had a pension across the street from the Museo del Prado, and I knew a lot of people there, because there were a lot of people from the film business in Madrid at the time. I had a very good time.

You were 21?
I was about 21, yes. It was the time of Franco, of course, and I knew a lot of Spaniards who were artists and poets, and they were working undercover. So there was always that in the air. But generally, the place was poor. You could live very well for very little money. I saw art everywhere. I went everywhere and saw everything I could see. Went to Granada and Toledo and Avila and Segovia.
It was going to the Alhambra that changed my view of what I wanted to be as a painter. Actually, that's not accurate; it reunited me with my feelings for wall painting, which I had always had, and although I was moved by everything at the Prado, especially the Italian paintings, none of which I had ever seen up to that point – I went there to go see El Greco, and I ended up hardly even looking at it. I spent all my time looking at Italian and Flemish painting – the Alhambra expanded my ideas about painting.

What about Paleolithic art, cave drawings or Roman art? Did you see any of that at that time while you were there?
What I saw was the Madrid Archaeological Museum which is one of the greatest museums I went to on the whole trip. It had unbelievable Roman mosaics, examples of Greek pottery, incredible medieval things, both Islamic and Western, and I spent a lot of time there. The Prado had Romanesque wall paintings, really great, but they weren't in situ, so once more I wasn't interested.
When you think about how your eye develops over time, it's almost enough to make you laugh. God, I mean, I missed Titian completely. I ran by Titian. I ran by those paintings, because I didn't want to look at those dark things. I wanted to go look at the Fra Angelico. I wasn't interested that much in medieval art. I liked it, but I quickly educated myself. This trip was an amazing quick education, because, as I said, the first place, Granada and the Alhambra, taught me that painting could be something other than a rectangle hanging on a wall in a museum or in a gallery. I saw for the first time how a painting didn't have to be even made of paint.

Why do you suppose that had such a strong appeal to you at that young age?

Oh, it was just the most beautiful – it's like saying, what was it about Paradise you liked?

Did you just feel that a traditional rectangle, that that was just too conventional? Did you have a feeling like that at that time, even?
I began to have it. That's when I began to have it, yes. And then the more I traveled, the more I saw paintings directly related to the sites, the more I became sure that I needed to break out of the paradigm of the picture.

And after Spain, did you come back to New York?
No. After Spain – oh, after I was traveling for a while. I went to the Island of Formentera, and I got a little house there and I painted. I stayed and I painted little panels, studies of things that I'd been seeing and thinking about. Then from there, I went back to Madrid. I traveled up to Northern Spain. Mogensen joined me, and there was a guy there who had been an architecture student at USC. He had been given a grant to go to Europe. What he thought he would do, very clever guy that he was, was he wanted to buy a Volkswagen, a van, and drive it all around Europe, and then return to the United States and sell it. So his ambition was to be able to go cheap and sleep in the van.
He offered Paul and I a ride if we paid for the gas. Since he had really no idea or interest in the things that were there to be seen, we told him where to go, and we kind of used him to go to these places. But he would always rebel, because his main issue was, "Would it be good for the car?" "Could we really go to Burgos? Is that a straight road? Is that flat?" You know, that kind of conversation. But he was pretty well used, and we got to go up as far as Barcelona, and seeing a lot of things on the way. Had a great time in Barcelona, saw Gaudí. Again, this idea about what you come to like. When we were in Barcelona, Paul and I both were primarily wanting to go see Gaudí.
So we saw the Gaudí things, and then we moved on to France. But later, these most recent years, I've become completely knocked out by Catalan Romanesque painting, and the paintings at the Palau on Montjuïc are among the most inspiring and greatest things I've ever seen. Had I seen them maybe in 19 – whatever – 63, I don't know if it would – what kind of effect it would have had on me. I think I would have really moved faster, even, into wanting to do fresco paintings.
Then I went to southern France and looked around. I went to the Matisse Museum in Cimiez specifically to see the paper paintings on the wall. Those were great, the Apollo painting was amazing, and the Tahitian things. That was a very beautiful experience, to go up to that deserted part of Nice, Cimiez. Nobody around. A little park and a statute of Louis Armstrong, and to go in and be left all alone with great Matisses and the place

where he made them, and the sense of his presence was there. It was quite extraordinary.

So it's really this feeling, that's like a total kind of environment, that that's what's most appealing to you?

Well, in the case of the Cimiez museum, it was that one painting that incorporated the wall into the painting, and was a very important part of the painting. I hadn't seen anything quite like that before, and that certainly influenced me. Then I went to go see the Rosaire Chapel at Vence, and I was disappointed by that.

How come?

It just seemed underwhelming to me. I had such high expectations, especially after Granada, for light and color. It was beautiful, but to this day I'm not convinced by the tiles or the place. The thing I like best of it are the vestments, which are incredibly beautiful. And the Museum of Modern Art has a wonderful collection – I think Philip Johnson gave a lot of it – and they keep it in storage. It's just a complete waste to keep these things in storage. They're so fantastic.

From there, I went to see the Léger Museum in Biot, which was another strong experience for me, because this museum is on a little hillside, and it has a large, rectangular cornice, very huge. You can see it from a great distance as you come up the hill. The whole thing is mosaic, and it's a wonderful, big, powerful mosaic. And for the same reasons we've been discussing, that had a very strong effect on me, as well as all the work in the museum and the place. Stained glass, mosaic, paintings, of course.

Fernand Léger Museum in Biot, France.

Nobody talked about Léger much in New York. So I was kind of learning about a new and very powerful artist. From there to Marseilles. Then I doubled back and I went to Italy, through Provence and saw a lot of Provence. I didn't go to the Cézanne house. I don't think it was a museum yet. It may have been, but I didn't go.
I went to Italy. I went to Rome first and then worked my way back up the spine of Italy, in trains always, and stopping and seeing every kind of possible fresco and mural that I could see. It was that experience that showed me what was possible, in a true painting sense, for wall painting, and seeing – first of all, seeing Giotto's Arena Chapel, at a time when you could go there and there would be nobody in the place.

Scrovegni Chapel also known as the Arena Chapel, Padua, Italy.

I was seeing these things at a great moment. They weren't yet popular tourist destinations, and in general, it was that experience all the way up to Venice. I got to Venice. It was the winter, I guess in November. I was out of money. Even though I had saved a bunch that would allow me to stay in Europe for maybe another year. But the money I had for traveling was just about gone. I came to Venice – it was bitterly cold – on the day that Kennedy was shot, November 22, 1963.

Oh, no.
I was staying in a closet, literally a closet that the bed folded out of into a hallway.

That was in November? The off-season.
I was really – I didn't know that Kennedy had been shot yet. I woke up the first morning, and I walked out onto the street shivering and looked down at the newspapers, and it said that – I thought it was Jackie Kennedy who had been killed. Oh, God, it was terrible. I was really upset, of course.
But still the main preoccupation at that moment was finding something to eat, because I was starving. Then I remembered a woman that I knew in Los Angeles. Her name was Sally Moore, and she had been a terrific tennis player – she was one of the very top-

ranked tennis players in the United States. She played Wimbledon, and she had come to USC to study painting, and I had an enormous crush on her.

Arrigo Cipriani at Harry's Bar during the '60s.

We used to be – we were friends, and she said to me, "If you ever get to Venice and you need something, go see Arrigo Cipriani. He's an old friend of mine." So there I was, walking on the streets, and I remembered what Sally Moore had told me. So I looked for Harry – I knew he had this place called Harry's Bar, and I had read Hemingway, so I knew sort of where Harry's Bar was.

Across the river…

Yes. So I went in and there was Harry Cipriani standing there at the bar. The first thing I said, "Oh, my name is so-and-so, and Sally said to say hi." He just sort of gave me a hug, and he said, "I'm so sorry about Kennedy." And that's when I knew it was Jack Kennedy. He told me, explained it to me. I guess he took a look at me and saw I was pretty bedraggled, and he said, "Look. Why don't you come back for dinner tonight? We'll have dinner." He was like a fairy godfather to me. I came in and he gave me this astounding dinner. I remember every bite of it to this moment.

Then the next day, he took me out in the boat. He took me to Torcello to the see the – essentially to see the basilica that was there, with the amazing dome, gold dome, of the Virgin floating. Do you know that?

I don't think I know that one.

Oh, my God. It was so extraordinary. It was gray mist and nobody around. So that was my Venetian experience, and the next day – I had seen the Accademia. But again, I was stupid. I didn't know about Veronese. I didn't know about Titian. I wasn't looking at the Venetians. I was looking at the Florentines; I was looking at Piero della Francesca. I was looking at, you know – I missed that whole thing.

Well, that's why we go back.

Oh, of course. But I mean, but it's so interesting that it was just there, a hidden treasure that I had walked by. Then I went to American Express to see if the money that I requested had come in, and there was a draft notice waiting for me; I'd been drafted.

Oh, not a bank draft. A military draft notice.

It was '63. We weren't yet at war with Vietnam.

Oh, what an end to that dream, though.

Yes, right, because I had money saved up to remain. This was such a shock. I had no idea. I'd really been kind of out of it. I hadn't been paying a lot of attention to world events, let me tell you, except for Kennedy's assassination. We were not yet officially at war. We hadn't declared war, but we were sending advisors and all that. I didn't know anything about it, sort of obtuse. I was told I had to report for induction at a certain date in Los Angeles, and take my physical.

I went back, and I realized that I would probably go to Vietnam unless I could get in a reserve unit. I found it impossible to do the thing of feigning insanity, and I didn't know enough about it to be a conscientious objector, which these days I would have been. At the time, I just didn't think about it. But I wasn't going to lie to anybody and I wasn't going to fake insanity or stay up for two weeks without sleep.

Staying up for five days on end so their blood pressure was…

I just couldn't do it. That just wasn't going to happen, and as I say, I would have done it straightforward and said, if I knew what I was doing, said, "Lookit, I don't believe in this. I'm not going to go, so throw me in jail," what I should have done. I joined a reserve unit in Los Angeles, an artillery unit, and after a couple of months, I went to basic training. In the time between my return and going into basic training, I drew and painted. I thought a lot about coming back to New York. By that time, I knew that New York was going to my next, my definite next and probably last stop.

So I went to basic training at Fort Ord, got measles, got out of doing a lot of crap because I was in the hospital. But at that point, I began meeting returning "advisors," who were now the non-commissioned officers who were training us, and they were incredibly scary, horrible people, all of them. They were drunks for the most part, alcoholics and drug users, you know, completely messed up. These guys were the first casualties of the Vietnam War.

You think it was a direct result of their experience?

Absolutely, absolutely. They'd come back and they'd be wild-eyed, and they'd say to you "You'd better listen to me. You'd better listen to me, because those guys over there, they're going to kill you. This is real, you know, bayonet, yell, 'Kill!' You'd better mean it," you know, and that's when I began to see what it was about, began to understand it, observing from within the army what was going on in Vietnam. I said, whoa, I'm not doing this one. Forget this. Maybe I'm not a pacifist. I would have gone to fight, and in certain circumstances I would fight, probably, you know. But man, this was so wrong, and

then I began to understand the politics of it. I began to read and learn about it.
So staying out of the war was something that was a big deal to me, not just because I was afraid of getting killed. But by that time, I knew how unjust it was and how terrible it was.

When was this, '64?
Sixty-four, yes. So when I got done with my artillery training at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, where I mostly drove a jeep for forward observers – and I was assigned to paint stars on the sides of jeeps. That was my job. By that time, I was communicating with Brice and with Hochhausen and with other people in New York about how I could get here, and I was reading the Village Voice, which more or less saved my life, because I could somehow stay in touch with New York. In fact, it had the same role for me then that I can imagine the Brooklyn Rail would have at this moment for younger artists all over the world, because they can get it on Internet. They can stay in touch with everything.

I went from Fort Sill back to Los Angeles for a very short time, cleared up some things there, got another car. I'd been driving across the country, it seems nonstop, since I was about 16. I drove again to New York. This time, my friend Hochhausen put me up. I got work. I did a job with the Modern Museum as a guard, and I was doing carpentry work. I had a studio on West Broadway, tiny little studio, very small. Dick Van Buren was also in the building and a guy called Dan Dudrow, who had been at Yale summer school, as well. He had a studio.
We were all working away. So I was beginning to make the shaped canvases and spraying them. I began to develop an interest in spray painting. Paul Mogensen's father was a professional spray painter. He painted machinery for county fairs and that sort of thing.

So he knew all the tricks and...
Yes, and eventually he taught me a lot of things about spray painting.

Were you AWOL (Absent Without Official Leave) at this point, or were you..
Oh, thanks for bringing it up to date. No. As a matter of fact, what happened was – and this was an ongoing story for a number of years. I was placed in something – because I didn't even have an address. I was placed in something called a control group. Now this was kind of a crap shoot, because a control group meant you actually didn't have to go to meetings. But in the case of a call-up, you were likely to be one of the people that they

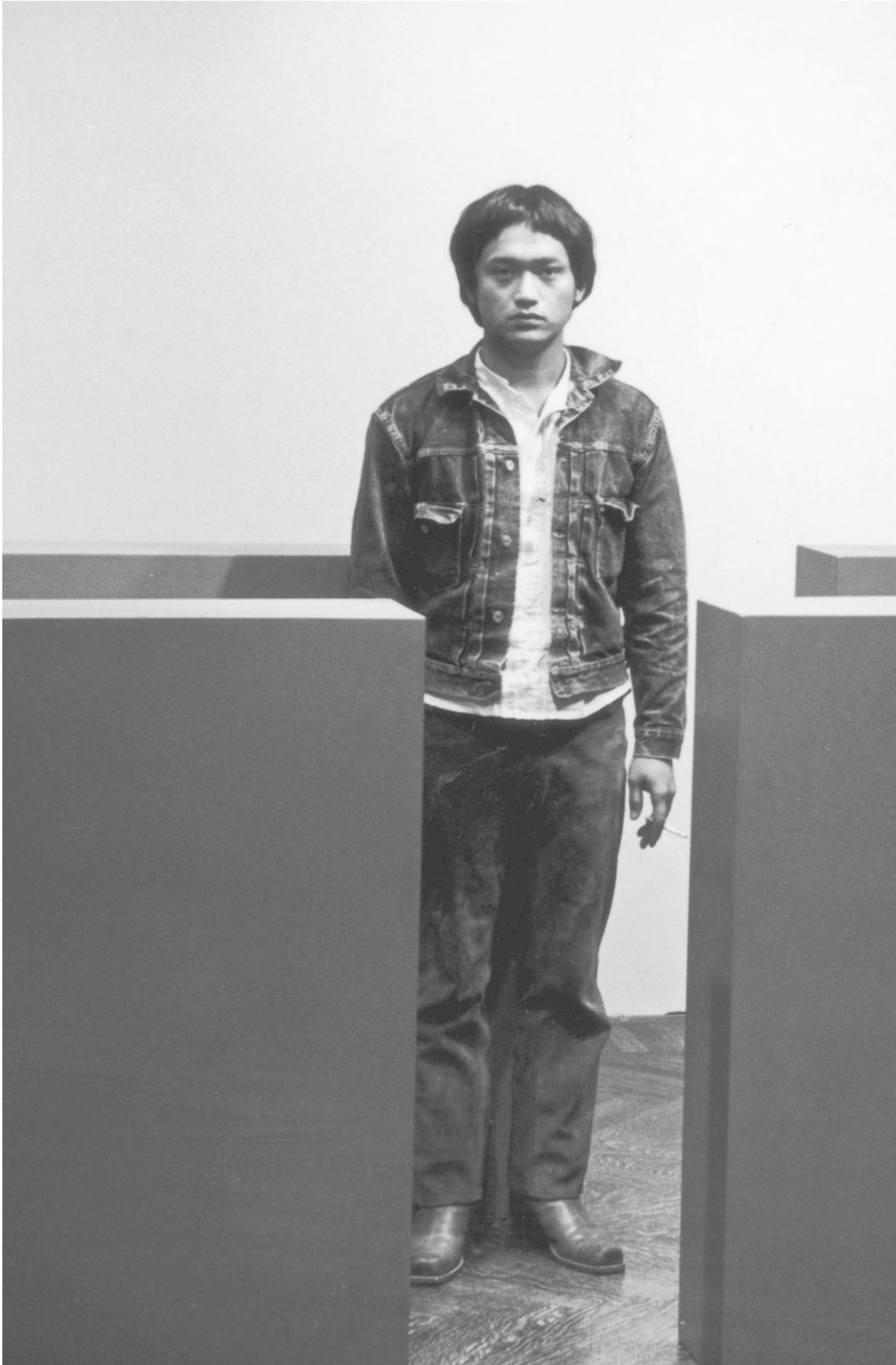
Richard Van Buren during the 60's

431 Broome Street, New York, David Novros studio during the '60s.

would call up first. So I went in a control group and nervous, of course, all the time, meanwhile protesting the war and living with Bill Hochhausen for a little while. I think it was maybe like three or four months and using the studio on Broome, where I made the double right-angle painting that was in the Guggenheim Museum "Systemic Painting" show in 1966, I made a spray booth out of a piano that had been left in the space. I pushed the piano up against the window, put a little fan in it and some plastic around it. And I used to have to paint the pieces in sections. I couldn't paint the whole thing, because there was no room to maneuver. It was like a Buster Keaton movie. Then I found the studio at 431 Broome, which was going to be my first place to live. Thanks to a $100 a month from my dad and my job at the Modern and some carpentry work, I was able to kind of pay for things.

You were a guard at the Modern?

I was a guard at the Modern. And while I was a guard at the Modern, I met Bob Duran, and he took the space below me at 431 Broome Street. We were – he and his wife Jan Sarkisian, we were very tight. I think he was one of the really great painters of that period.



Robert Duran with one of his sculptures at the Bykert Gallery, New York, 1968.

I love his work and I think he's – I loved him, and I'm sorry he's dead.

Yes, he's – I've heard his name so many different times from painters in admiration. I mean, his work is really well thought of, but unknown to anybody outside someone like yourself, who was part of that scene at the time. Let me ask you this. Within this kind of painting scene that you were a part of, was anyone else – had this military thing hanging over them?

Mogensen.

Oh, he did, too?

Yes, Mogensen was the only person I knew who was in the same place. To follow up on the army thing. When I moved into the place on Broome Street, a lot of artists were living here. It wasn't deserted as the myth goes. There were a lot of artists, especially on Broome Street.

Leo Castelli and Rosenquist, Broome Street studio, New York, 1966

When you say "a lot," you mean like hundreds or…
Couple hundred, maybe. You'd go by at night and the lights would be on. You'd see people working. This was even before Don Judd came. Rosenquist lived next door to me. The first day I was here, I met him on the street and he introduced himself. He said "Hey, listen, you want to come to a party tonight?" I said, "Oh, yeah, sure." I went up there and he was having a party for F-111. He just finished it in the place next to me.
I met Lichtenstein and Ivan Karp. There were a bunch of people at Rosenquist's party, and they were incredibly generous and kind and nice to me. They all said, "We'd like to see your work," and, "Come have dinner with us," and that sort of thing. It was just pure serendipity.
So I ended up in this place, and hiding out, as it were, because when I was living there, we were hiding from the Buildings Department, the Fire Department, the cops, for whatever reason, you know, and the military.

Was the industry relatively active then?
Which industry do you mean?

I mean, like, you know, whatever fabric businesses or whatever that were in SoHo?
Yes. It was very busy. In the daytime, it was incredibly busy. SoHo was very convenient for a painter. There were lumber yards, hardware stores on Canal Street, fabric places, and paint stores. We'd shop in Little Italy. We'd go eat in Chinatown. It was incredibly inexpensive. You'd do your laundry in Chinatown, sit there and watch it go around. It was just a normal but a most exciting life. So much good stuff was going on everywhere – music and poetry and painting and sculpture and dance.
To finish the army story, I stayed in my place, and whenever we'd see – we could look down from the top to the street. Whenever I'd see any kind of hat with gold braids on it, we didn't open the door. So I kind of disappeared from their radar. Then when I went to Park Place, we were very active politically. I was always scared that I'd get caught, you know, something, like being involved in Park Place, the protesting thing being visible.
But we did it. We all hid. We all worked. It was kind of an irony that we were very ambitious. So here we were hiding, on the one hand, but trying to have our stuff get out on the other hand. And eventually, nine years later, a letter came to my parents – was it nine years, no. Seven years later. A letter came to my house in California saying that I was to be mustered out of the army, but in order to be mustered out, I had to rejoin a unit and go to the summer camp.

When was this that they got the letter?
I think this must have been about '67-'68.

Oh, wow. So Vietnam's still…
Yes. In the interim, I had fallen off a building and I really did bad things to my leg. I actually fractured my patella. So I had my doctors write a letter to them telling them that I was injured to the extent that I couldn't do any service anymore. They kind of accepted that letter. I think that's why they really didn't come after me hard.
The summer of '69 I first went to the reserve unit in Jamaica, Queens, and they were an artillery unit. I went to a couple of meetings there, and then we went off to Fort Drum in Watertown to summer camp. Before we went off, Brice gave me a candy bar – I've told this story before – of hash. I went up there, and every morning I would go out and – all they wanted me to do was paint a coat of arms. I astounded them by roughing it out as a drawing on a piece of plywood. "Oh, that's great, that's great. Now get me some airplane dope" – because it had a red ground – "and some brushes," and they came back. And every morning I went out to this little shed that was in the woods, a very nice studio.
I would begin painting on the red and take a big bite of the candy bar, and I had my own notebook. So I drew out there and worked. At the end of two weeks, I finished part of the red ground. I never finished it. They didn't seem to care. They were perfectly happy. They really just wanted to get rid of me. I was just a kind of waste of time for everybody. So that was the end of my military.

When you got that notice, were you worried that this was some kind of ruse, where you were going to show up and then they'd immediately put you on a plane to Hanoi or something?
Well, they couldn't by that time. There was nothing they could do. They said, "Turn in your equipment." Of course, I hadn't had any equipment for about six years. They overlooked everything pretty much. As I say, they weren't really – in those days, it's not like now with Iraq. Reservists were flaky and not thought reliable, and really, you know, they weren't going to be the first guys to go and get their ass shot off. So it was a pretty – it was a way of evading things, and you know, it's one of the real unfair aspects of the war. Because if you were in a unit like that – if you weren't able to get in one and you didn't know about it, for whatever reason, you were more likely to get killed.

Unfair then and unfair now, for different reasons.
Yes. Now, there's parity. Everybody's getting fucked.

of the three principal Substances, Sal, Sulphur, and Mercur

System (si·stėm). Also 7–8 systeme, sistem(e. [ad. late L. *systēma* musical interva in med. or mod.L., the universe, body of th articles of faith, a. Gr. *σύστημα* organized whol government, constitution, a body of men or animal musical interval, union of several metres into whole, f. *σύν* SYN- + *στα*-, root of *ἱστάναι* to set u (see STAND *v.*). Cf. F. *système* (1664, 'le system de l'ame', in Hatz.-Darm.), It., Sp. *sistema*, P *systema*, G. *system*, etc.]

I. An organized or connected group of objects

1. A set or assemblage of things connected associated, or interdependent, so as to form complex unity; a whole composed of parts i orderly arrangement according to some scheme c plan; rarely applied to a simple or small assemblag of things (nearly = 'group' or 'set').

a 1638 MEDE *Apostasy Latter Times* (1641) 64 Mans li s a systeme of divers ages...The yeare is a systeme of fou emed books.

SYSTEMIC PAINTING

Systemic (siste·mik), *a.* [irreg. f. SYSTEM -IC; used for differentiation of meaning instead the regular *systematic*.]

1. *Physiol.* and *Path.* Belonging to, supplyin

in every sentence. 1865 TYLOR *Early Hist. Man.* i. 2 systematic treatise on the subject.

3. *gen.* Arranged or conducted according to system, plan, or organized method; involving observing a system; (of a person) acting accordin to system, regular and methodical.

1790 BURKE *Rev. France* 84 These gentlemen value ther selves on being systematic. 1796 — *Regic. Peace* ii. Wh

Systemic Painting, Catalogue exhibition, Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York, 1966.

So tell me more about, like around ’65, you know, just more of this sort of – were you starting to exhibit those works? You mentioned you were in the Guggenheim “Systemic Painting” show. That must have been a little bit later.
Yes, that was ’66. Yes, ’66, I believe, maybe ’67. When I was in 431 Broome, I was tight with Brice; I was really tight with Bob Duran, and Mogensen was threatening to come out. He was still in California. I was in touch with him and a number of other people.
Frosty Meyers, who had come out from San Francisco with a group of Bay Area artists, lived down the block from me. He had become very – oh, and Bob Grosvenor, I beg your pardon. I should definitely not leave this out. Grosvenor lived in the same building as Rosenquist, next door to me, and I became very friendly with Grosvenor. I admired him and I do admire him. I think he’s a great artist.
And he and I talked and Frosty talked, and they were doing Place II. There had been a Park Place. These San Franciscans were going to make a co-op gallery, and they asked me if I would like to come to work as a carpenter.

Park Place I was in San Francisco?
Park Place I was on Park Row.

Okay.
And Park Place II was on West Broadway, now LaGuardia Place. It was the first gallery in SoHo, and it was a cooperative, and it was being run by the artists. They had backing from Virginia Dwan, Pat Lannan, Vera List, and the Murchisons, and the Guibersons [Allen and Betty Blake Guiberson] from Texas. The artists would give a work a year to each of those people, in return for them supporting the gallery. The artists in return would get a show. The first year it was to be a two-person show, the second year it went to a one-person show if you wanted it, or whatever you wanted, and also, lots of group shows and performances, and all sorts of things.

Installation of David Novros and Mark di Suvero at the Park Place Gallery, 1966. Photo: John D. Schiff

In the first year, John Gibson was the director. We hired him. The second year, Paula Cooper became the director. While I was doing carpentry work, Frosty was high on my paintings. He brought di Suvero over to my studio. The people who were supporting the gallery might have supported it anyway, but they certainly were mostly supporting it because of di Suvero. Mark liked my work a lot, and he said, "I'd like you to be in my show with me." It was a two-man show at Park Place.

Do you think he was responding to its sculptural properties as much as its painting properties, or...

Well, as you know from our previous conversations, I don't like the reference to my work in any way as sculpture, and I try to keep it out of any conversation I can. I see them as paintings of a certain kind, wall paintings, portable murals, as it were. I made them definitely with that in mind. Had somebody come to me at the time and said, "We'd like you to paint – we'd like to commission you to paint a fresco," then I would have been happy to have painted it directly on the wall, and not made objects.

Is it fair to say that they were excited because your paintings weren't like the

conventional rectangular form of painting?

Let me just carry on from the last point. Because I wanted to be a wall painter, and I didn't have commissions, I had to develop strategies for how to be a painter. Now my strategies came by way of making shapes that would move along a wall, and allow a viewer to move along the wall. So you're having kind of a kinesthetic experience, not simply standing in front of a rectangle waiting for it to do something to you. I used colors that changed as you walked along, the Murano colors, and even before that, metallic colors and other things.

I had seen Stella's work, and I was very impressed by it when I first saw it. I think the first time I saw the shape things was in – when I was back in Los Angeles and I'd seen Walter Hopps's selection for Sao Paulo, with the Judds. That was really my first view of contemporary New York art. I was impressed, because what I was seeing dovetailed very nicely with what I'd seen in Europe. Stella's things for me were like the Alhambra, like the mosaics. They had that geometry and they had used the wall, to some degree, and they opened, and I liked that. I saw a Noland. It looked very strong to me, beautiful in fact, using these huge expanses of color. Judd looked terrific to me.

So when I came to New York, the main gallery that I went to see was the Green Gallery. All of us were knocked out by the Green Gallery. It was ironic that just a couple of years later that would be Bykert Gallery. I did my two shows at Park Place, the first with Mark, and then the second I did with – I invited Carl Andre to make a piece in the back. I had become close with Carl.

Let's talk about Max's Kansas City, myself and probably a lot of younger people only know that through films about Warhol. So I'm curious what the scene there was like for you as a painter and what your take on it was.

Frosty Myers and Carlos Villa were very tight with Mickey Ruskin, who opened Max's. He had a place called The Ninth Circle, where Carlos had been the bartender. Both Frosty and Carlos were artists living near where I lived at the time, and as I said, I'd been doing carpentry jobs just trying to make ends. So when Max's started to be put together, they had a bunch of booths, and these booths were made out of some kind of plastic.

Max's Kansas City, Album Cover, NYC, 1976 by Bob Gruen.

They wanted to paint them black. They had one night to paint them, and they knew that I could spray. So I went up there with my spray equipment and a mask, and we moved all the booths up to the top floor, the second floor. I sprayed them black in one night, and we moved them back down again. That was my first contact with Max's Kansas City. I was the booth sprayer. And as time went on, Mickey began to like my work and Frosty pushed my work.

He got a couple of my paintings, and as a result, I had a limitless bar tab and food tab. And I started going there all the time. I have a somewhat different memory of it, from what I've been reading about the period. They talk about the second floor being where the artists were. There was some kind of exclusivity of the second floor. That's not how I remember it at all.

Most of the time, Brice, Carl, I, Chamberlain, Neil Williams, Smithson, et cetera, sat kind of in the middle, in the booths on the side. We never went upstairs. I never remember going

upstairs until music was brought in. The back room was more or less the Warhol crowd, and we never went back there either, or rarely anyway. There was a lot of interchange going on in the middle of the first floor. This is early on at Max's.
Then when the Longview Country Club opened up the block – another one of Mickey's places – it was like a kind of a big bus station in Texas, full of art, and it was a great place. That was Frosty Myers's dream child. Maybe Les Levine had something to do with it, too; I can't remember for sure. He has another place up the block, as well, with Mickey. So there was a sprouting of these bars up along Park Avenue, and Judd lived about two blocks away. He would come quite often to Max's.
It was a great place to hang out, everybody cross-pollinating there. I don't remember any exclusivity. I remember the waitresses extremely well. They were all friends of ours. Brice's wife Helen was a waitress at the time, and Jill Lumpkin, Marsha Harris. And Jeannie Blake used to come in. She was working for Dick Bellamy, and she'd kind of hang out with us. Dick would come in. It was – it's just what's missing right now.

How did that scene end? Did the place just close, or did it dwindle before it closed?
Well, it morphed into a place that was more about music upstairs. When that changed, it was good. I mean nobody was complaining. We could still hang out downstairs and go up and dance and…
Slowly it got a little druggier. Meanwhile, two other places had opened up, or three, actually. St. Adrian's, which was a big, bar-like place down on Broadway near Bleeker, a dark, cavernous weird place, with a lot of action going on, a lot of artists there. Then Remington's, which was a place downstairs on Waverly, in a basement.
Those are the places I hung out, and four, because I went to Longview, as well. You'd always find somebody you knew, an artist you liked, somebody to talk to about things, what you had seen lately, that sort of thing. And since I had work at Mickey's place, I could feed myself. I could eat as much steak as I wanted.

Good deal.
Yes, it was a good deal.

It sounds like… I mean, the scene could have self-segregated according to tribe a little bit, and in one of our previous conversations, you made some distinctions between the abstract painters of the '60s and the abstract painters of the '70s. It was very nuanced, this distinction that you made, and I was wondering if we could cover some of that. Could you be more specific? Which painters are we talking about?

Well, maybe at the time we were – I know that we were looking at one of those Minimalism surveys, one of the recent shows. I can't remember if it was the L.A. one or something else, and you were talking about how the '60s painters had different qualities. Maybe they were tougher than the '70s painters that tended to be more lyrical and lighter. I can't remember the point exactly.
What I was trying to say when we were talking about this kind of insistence on the '60s painters being essentially object makers.

Back to the difference between the '60s and '70s, though, like, what's your take on some of the abstract painters that came a little later, like the Lyrical Abstractionists?
There was Lyrical Abstraction going on in the '60s, as well. A group that kind of coalesced around Greenberg, people like Bill Pettit, Ronnie Landfield, Dan Christensen.
I was friendly with Poons when I first came to New York, and I admired his work. He asked me at one point – it was like a litmus test – what do you think of Olitsky's paintings? I said, I really can't stand them. That was the last time we had anything to talk to each other about. He was really doctrinaire. Nobody could understand it now, because nobody cares that much about one style of painting or another style of painting. It's not a relevant issue in today's scene. But in those days Greenberg ruled the roost.

What I'm curious about, too, is, you know, how Greenberg might have responded to your work and some of the work of your contemporaries? I mean, did you hear anything through back channels or through the artists themselves? Or was it a total blank, total wall?
I never heard from him. I saw him occasionally at the Dom. By this time it was the latter part of his career. He hadn't written anything that was interesting for quite a long time. I have to say here that I loved his work when I read it as a student at USC. I thought he was great.

It's still exciting; I mean, the way he anticipates Pollock before it actually happens.
Yeah. And his style is beautiful. It's just too bad he didn't keep writing and stay out of the art business.

Since we're talking about tribal divisions to some degree, too, I wondered if we could talk about the geography of downtown. Because you – at one point I was living in the Bowery, and you were telling me about the history of the Bowery and how the Bowery crowd was a little bit different from, you know, the Broadway crowd.

Ahh, the geography. Well, it was shifting all the time. So my primary interest was the area right around Broome Street, between the people I knew on Broome Street between about Crosby and West Broadway. And there were quite a lot of artists there. Then later on, in, I think, '68, Judd moved in.

About that time also, Rosenquist moved out from his place. Poons had been there before. Stella had been down on West Broadway for a while and he left. He was gone, and there was a group of people who were much less well known working, and out of that grouping, that became Park Place, and a number of other artists.

You know Michael, I'm trying to recollect this. But it's all kind of blurry, and I don't remember who lived where and together anymore. But all I remember is the greatest concentration of people were right here. And things happened quickly.

Okay. But let's bring it back to where you were, for lack of a better term, career-wise, sort of in the late '60s. When did you stop showing with Park Place? Or maybe we should talk about the transition from Park Place into Bykert?

Actually, the first place I ever showed was with Virginia Dwan in Los Angeles, in her Westwood Gallery.

Poster published and sent as invitation for exhibition held at Virginia Dwan Gallery, Los Angeles, 1966.

That's when you were, like, 25, or something like that?
Yes. She had a situation in Los Angeles that allowed artists to come and stay at her fabulous place in Malibu, and she had a studio in Ocean Park.

Great deal.
I was so happy. Bob Grosvenor had done it just before me, and I'd gone out and – I'm just transgressing here a little bit. But I went out and I made the things in Paul Mogensen's driveway. I made the actual physical paintings, and I took them down to Ocean Park and painted them there in the summer. I painted the whole show in that summer, which is what every artist did. Bob made his piece. Carl Andre came next; he made his piece, and John Chamberlain was due in.
I never really knew Chamberlain. I'd seen him at Max's a few times. We chatted, and I loved his work. He came in with his two, three kids, no nanny, no nothing. He showed up in this beat-up van, and he kind of commandeered the house. He took it over. I was happy to let him have it, commandeer it. Fine, take it. Go ahead. He got these kids taken care of and was having a good time making fantastic foam rubber things. He would stay up in a sunlit room looking out over the ocean, with big pieces of foam, and he made the couches and other work out of tied-up foam rubber.
People coming and going all over the place. But I learned more from Chamberlain that summer than I had in all the previous schools of art. I really learned about risk.

What was it like to be 25 and being in a show with Ad Reinhardt?
Well, I wasn't in the show with Reinhardt. That was a one-man show at Virginia's, where I painted the white paintings and one black. I remember walking in Westwood, where she had a gallery that had been a shoe store. The gallery had a shoe store-like entrance, with windows on either side. I didn't know it was a gallery. I looked in the windows, where you'd normally see shoes, and there were these black squares. I sort of shook my head, did a double take, went over and back. I sensed they were paintings. I looked at them. This was about 1960, I'm guessing '60, and they were the Reinhardts. It was the first time they had been shown on the West Coast.
I went in, and I was just completely amazed by them. I thought they were great. So to be showing – and she had done a lot of other really terrific shows, like Pollock and Klein and other things I admired. She also showed a lot of the Nouveau Réalistes and –

Ad Reinhardt painting in his studio.New York, 1962.

Yves Klein or Franz Kline?

Yves Klein and Franz Kline. She showed both of them, and they were memorable shows. So to be able to show in this wonderful gallery, this physically terrific space, was a big deal for me. The reason she asked me to do it was because she was supporting Park Place, and helping those members she liked.

Then that same year, I had my first show at Park Place, along with Mark. And the following year, I had a one-person show at Park Place, where I asked Carl Andre to make a piece in the back room. At the same time, I had a show uptown at the Dwan Gallery and a show in Germany, a guy called Mueller. I was very active getting the stuff out all over the place.

In about '66, Klaus Kertess came down from Yale, and he was seeing a lot of the artists I admired. He wanted to open a gallery. I felt I had a commitment to Dwan. By this time Park Place had come out of its two-year deal and was over with, essentially. So I could have stayed with Dwan, but at that point John Weber came to run the Dwan gallery in New York, and I didn't get along well with Weber. Meanwhile, I loved Klaus and what he was starting to do, and, of course, Brice was going to go there, and then Bob Duran and all my pals eventually ended up showing there. So it was natural for me to show there. I showed with Bykert from about '68 through maybe '74, '75, I guess.

Wow, that's a long run.
Yes, it was a long run. I showed typically once a year there.

Can you give me an overview of what some of those shows were like? Were these large panel pieces or…
There were two galleries. The first gallery took over the Greene Street space on 57th Street, and it was a narrow, professional building. In that gallery, I showed shaped canvases in a '66 group show first. That was the first time I showed there. I think Ralph Humphrey was in the show; Bob Murray was probably in the show. I'm not sure who was in the show.

And then there got to be, kind of, a grouping that people put together. I was in two or three different shows around Europe, and one in Pennsylvania that included me and Brice and Mangold and Ryman and Mogensen sometimes. The catalogue had the most ridiculous name. It was "A Romantic Minimalism." You know, it makes you vomit when you think about it. But at any rate, that was kind of a – beginning to be a kind of grouping. I was hoping that Klaus was going to go that way with the gallery.
But he expanded, and he expanded in an interesting sort of way. People like Bill Bollinger, Alan Saret.

Right. I've heard about that; like when Barry Levay came in, there was kind of a changing of the guard, so to speak.
I wouldn't ascribe it to Barry, no.
Klaus started to lose some interest, and Mary Boone became the secretary. She was very ambitious, and Klaus was beginning to lose interest in running the gallery on a daily basis. He wanted to write.
The direction started to change. Meanwhile, I was doing murals. I really couldn't figure out – I had done the rooms for the Houston show – how to continue in galleries after the Rice rooms.

What year was that?
I made them in '74, '75, and I showed, I think, two of them at Bykert – and later in '76 at Sperone Westwater Fischer – because by this time, Bykert had moved uptown to 81st Street, in a great townhouse that had been the Feigen Gallery before that. That was a wonderful space to show in, because it didn't look like an art gallery. It had two separate rooms. Each one was more or less square. So I showed those in place, and in a sense,

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"A Romantic Minimalism" will open at the Institute of Contemporary Art Wednesday (September 13) as the first of six shows scheduled for the I.C.A.'s 1967-68 season at the University of Pennsylvania.

Works of ten young Americans make up the exhibit of paintings and sculpture, open free to the public at the University's Furness Building, 34th Street and Locust Walk, from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily and Saturdays and from 1 to 5 p.m. Sundays. The show closes October 11.

The term "romantic minimalism" was used by the I.C.A.'s new director, Dr. Stephen Prokopoff, to describe a lyrical departure from the "classic" minimalist school of reduced color, form and finish epitomized by the late Ad Reinhardt's all-black canvases. The "romantic" version keeps the simplicity of form but allows for variation: a fleeting play of light; slight discrepancy of brush stroke; subtly mixed colors.

The 10 artists are Carl Andre, Peter Gourfain, Ralph Humphrey, Robert Mangold, Brice Marden, Agnes Martin, Paul Mogensen, David Nouros, Robert Ryman and Richard Van Buren.

(more)

A Romantic Minimalism, 1967, press release, Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania.

that was kind of my last attempt to relate my mural work to exhibitions.

I had left Bykert, and I was busily going along with my – oh, and I showed – I'm sorry. I'm

Riko Mizuno during the '60s in her Los Angeles art gallery.

leaving out a very important person. I showed at Riko Mizuno in the late '60s in Los Angeles. I had two shows with her. And she's one of the best people that I ever worked with, and her gallery was terrific to work in. So I was about out of galleries at that point, and then for the next 30 years I began working on murals and public art.

Can you talk a little bit about your idea of painting in place and, sort of, the timing of this, like with the show at Rice Institute for the Arts and, kind of, the idea of moving away from the galleries?
Well, I didn't consciously move away from the galleries. That's kind of a myth. I mean, I do sort of hate the galleries, in truth. I think that art oughtn't to be sold. I think it should be free for everybody. However, that isn't the reason I got interested in painting in place. I got interested in painting in place because my own experiences with painting in that circumstance were so powerful. They led me to think about ways of bringing it into the moment.

So there was never a conscious decision – that I'm no longer going to show privately; I'm going to go completely public?
No, no.

That was not part of it?
No. If a dealer had ever come up to me in the '60s and said – or the '70s – and said, "I'm going to support you in your desire to make mural painting, and I'll take a commission and I'll get you jobs." I would have been just delighted. But nobody was ever interested. It's because there's no product involved. Nobody – there's no secondary market, unless

you're Sol LeWitt, and I don't consider him a painter.

Right. It can't be resold.
Yes. It's out of the game. Now, Sol solved that problem by making his things remake-able with the diagrams that he uses.

And can you kind of go through the evolution of the paintings that were done as murals, like, which was the first one and – let's go through that.
Okay, because, as I said to you earlier, I felt that in the past, when I've done interviews, they tend to concentrate on exhibitions, museum shows, that sort of thing. Really, my chronology is best described through these projects that I made. The first one for Don Judd in 1970, I'd been doing a lot of reading. I'd never made a fresco. Hadn't even made a test panel. I had read Thompson and all the other people who had written about medieval fresco painting. I understood the technology. You know, intellectually I understood it.

David Novros at Donald Judd's studio in front of his restored 1970s fresco. New York, 2014.

Before you get on that, what was the feeling about it, as opposed to, say, doing the

spray paintings or other kinds of paintings? Why did you want to do fresco? Because a lot of artists would think, oh, that's more trouble than it's worth.
No. As a matter of fact, I thought it was simple. It is. It's like great cooking. It's very simple, but it's very complicated. You have to know a great deal to do it. If you follow certain, kind of, very simple, basic rules about it, it's a beautiful way to paint over large surfaces directly on the wall – even the medium is the wall itself, because it encapsulates the pigment in the calcium carbonate and the sand. So the painting becomes structurally part of the wall – it isn't dyed. People think it bleeds into the wall. That's not what happens. There is a very complex and interesting process by which the pigment is held.
I understood that a lot of the paintings that people think are frescos aren't frescos. For instance, the cave paintings weren't painted in that way. They're accidental frescos, because they painted them in pigment which would normally have disappeared, except that the walls of the cave sweated out the calcium carbonate and formed kind of a skin over the painting and sealed it in. The Egyptians didn't paint in fresco; they painted in tempera. The Greeks probably painted in tempera as well.
There's very little buon fresco, which means "true" fresco. Even the Italians in the 14th and 15th century who did the most buon fresco, had to use certain pigments in tempera, because they would have been eaten up by the lime. For instance, when you see a Fra Angelico like that big crucifix in San Marco, that has this kind of maroon ground. It was really blue when he first painted it. The maroon was a kind of an underpaint. At any rate, that's all arcane information about fresco painting.

That's okay. It's interesting. I mean, how did you acquire all this… because a lot of it must have been lost knowledge to some degree.
No, initially I read about it. First Thompson, a little Dover reprint. Excellent. Had everything you needed to know. Of course, how do you use it in the 20th century? That was another issue, because although the Mexicans painted, they were wildmen. I mean, they were painting with plastics and all kinds of things, and true fresco, mostly true fresco was invisible in New York
But I was trying to figure out a way of using fresco to express my own ideas. For me, it was perfect. By then, I was not spraying anymore. I was making panels, painted with brushes, and even though they were in units, in pieces, they were like portable, again, portable murals
Don and I talked. He knew of my interest in wall painting, and it dovetailed perfectly with his interest in making art in place, and taking into consideration the permanent relationship between the object or the painting and the place. He'd just got the place on

Untitled, 1977 Fresco, Gooch Auditorium, University of Texas Health Science Center, Dallas TX

Spring Street, and he said, "I'll pay for the materials if you want to come paint this painting in place." At the time, he promised to trade me a sculpture, which I never got.

So I said, "Yes, of course." I began plotting it. It was in the summer, and I made a big cartoon. I was going to "pounce" it -the traditional technique – and we found a plasterer who was an assistant to a plasterer. He wasn't really a plasterer. He was a Jamaican guy, and he was wonderful and sweet-tempered. He understood what we wanted, because to work in what's called "hot lime" is a lost art now – that's lime that's been slaked in water. It's what you have to use when you make true fresco

He knew how to do that. So he came in and he laid – first we went back down to the brick. We tore everything out. We scrubbed it with acid, as I'd been reading about how to prepare the wall. Tried to, as best I could, to determine whether the wall was dry. It seemed to be, and then he laid up a brown coat on the wall, which is a kind of undercoat. Then in one day, he came and he put the finish coat on. I pounced it, and he did half the finish coat, about seven feet by 17 feet
I painted half of it in one day. Then the next day – it was summertime, so we had a lot of light and a long day. We worked as Judd's kids were running around, and Julie, his wife, was there and Don was there. The cats were running around. This guy, this wonderful Jamaican guy just kept working and I just kept working. At the end of two days, the painting was finished, and it was perfect. I don't mean in a – it's up to somebody else to decide whether it's aesthetically perfect
But it was perfect technically. I mean, it was wonderful. Then in about three years, a stain started to appear on the top, a brown stain, the stain also appeared on the floor above, on the walls that Don had plastered, just raw plaster, a rough brown coat. What had come about was that the oil from the machinery that used to be on these floors had gotten in the joists and was gravitating down the walls

David Novros fresco at Donald Judd's studio.

Conservators at work on the treatment of David Novros fresco at Donald Judd's studio, 2014.

I tried to restore the painting on a number of occasions. Then the damp got into the back. So at this point, that painting is in bad shape. It can't be restored, because you have to first – what I learned from that was that the most important thing in fresco is the ground, that is, the building itself, and making sure that it's not going to have damp coming in from the back, that oil isn't going to come down. And don't work in front of bathrooms or elevators. These are kinds of simple, stupid things, but you learn them as you go. I'm re-making the Judd fresco soon, since it can't be restored and moving it from the site would destroy its meaning and go against Don's wishes.

Before we move on to the next fresco, though, I'm curious. Was there some kind of partying when it was done? Did people come and see it?

Partying, no. There's no feedback. It was just Don and I and Julie and Jamie Dearing. People now say that it looks great, or people say that it looks good. But it was really overlooked, and for a long time, when people came to write about the house, they never even mentioned it, which I always found astounding, since only the Dan Flavin on the top floor and my painting were really made for the place, other than Don's things. There's a set of two big Stellas, but they weren't made for the place. Great Chamberlains. They were objects that really weren't part of his program of making things for the place.

I would have thought it would have warranted some attention, just because it was a contemporary artist using fresco…
Oh, almost nothing.

I mean were any of the contemporaries working in fresco at all?
No. It just disappeared. I was happy that I'd done it. I thought it looked great. It confirmed all my ideas about wanting to paint on the wall. It really charged me up, ready to go. I always thanked Don for it. He was very generous and it was terrific to be able to do it. But it never – you know, when people come to write, they're looking for the brands. Oh, there's a Reinhardt painting. Okay. So they can write, he had a Reinhardt. There's a Stella and there's a Flavin, you know, and then there's the Novros.

One other thing about it. Did you have the color worked out beforehand, or did you improvise the color?
I had the color worked out. I made a watercolor that belongs to Tony Berlant. You don't have time to fool around. It's not an intuitive, you know, kind of medium. I'm trying to make it into a more intuitive medium, but at that time, it wasn't
And then I made a mural at the Museum of Modern Art. That was another kind of learning experience. Again, perfect technically, wonderful grouping of plasters and assistants.

Richard Tuttle and David Novros exhibition. Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1972.

What year was this?

This was in 1972, and it was in the Projects program. Richard Tuttle had a room of things, and then there was a hall that connected the Whitney to the Modern at the time, actually connected the restaurant to the Modern at the time, and then went out into the Whitney from the restaurant. I painted in that hall. It was about nine by 30, something like that, 10 by 30. Opposite it was a large oil painting that I made. When it was finished, I was very depressed, because even though I knew that I'd agreed to – that it was going to be temporary, it looked so good and we'd worked so hard on it, it seemed a shame to tear it down.

How long had it been up for?

It was up for a regular show, a month or two. Schjeldahl wrote about it, saying that it was the work of a master, da da da, and then he never wrote another word about my work. I said to the people at the Modern, including some trustees that I knew, why don't you just make a sheet rock wall over this, and then I'll give it to you. You can have it. Just keep the painting here. You can cover it and do exhibits. But don't tear it down.

Well, they tore it down. Some of these trustees would come to me and say, "I've got a piece of your fresco," and they'd wave a piece of rubble in my face. It was very depressing, and at that point, I realized I was never going to do any more temporary exhibitions. In a way, it's become very common now for people to do installations. I just don't have that in my head

I also became aware that the museums weren't permanent. Up to that point – I was so naive. I thought museums would always be where they were. You could go in and you would always see the Cézanne Bather in that place. It was precisely that iconic relationship that I liked about museums. And with the exception of the Met, almost all museums – well, even the Met has added on, but they don't add on in a way that destroys what was there. But these places like the Modern that have constantly switched their perspective, in their attempt to tell the story of modern art, are just ruining the whole experience.

Places like the Whitney never had it, so you didn't have to worry about that. There was never any sense of iconic relationship between the art and the place. But all the good museums, the great museums, always had it, in the sense of an implied permanence, kind of a pretend permanence, which is, to me, very important when you go to look at a work of art. You don't want to think it could be somewhere else. All these lent works that are sent from one museum to another are a big mistake.

That's so awful that they would – they wouldn't preserve it in its wholeness, but they thought enough of it to grab a piece of the rubble and save that?

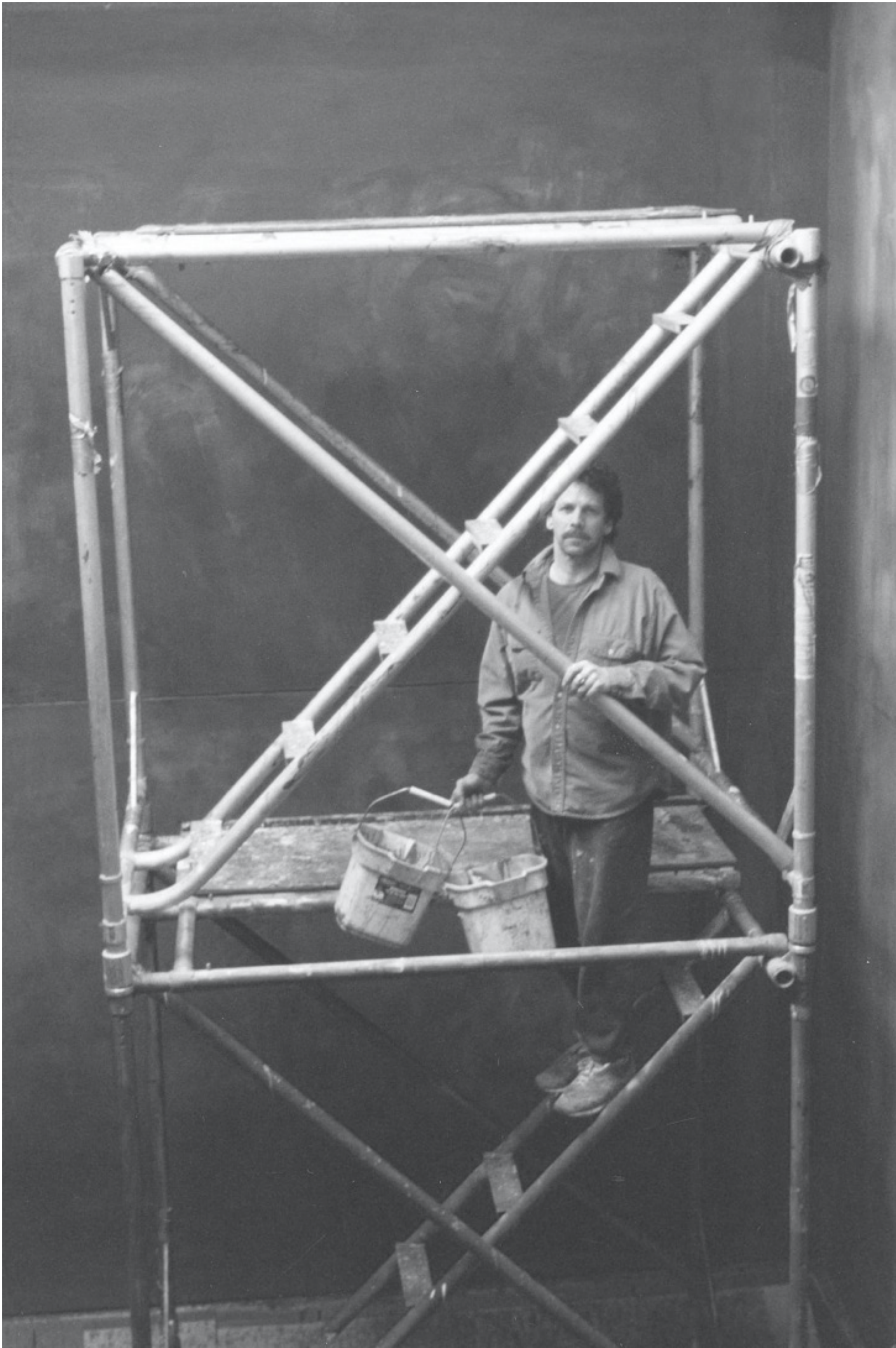
It's a kind of romanticism. Just as there's a kind of romanticism about fresco. If you tell somebody – I used tempera afterwards, in some areas, they say, "Oh, you mean it wasn't all true fresco?" I'm making a painting, you know, and I just used fresco because sometimes it's the best way to get what I want. Sometimes I have to do another thing. But this idea of the ruin, suggesting that fresco is an archaic thing, so that you could have a piece of it, you know, like have a piece of any Cimabue off the floor after the earthquake. Meaningless.

A relic.

A relic. That's the word I'm looking for.

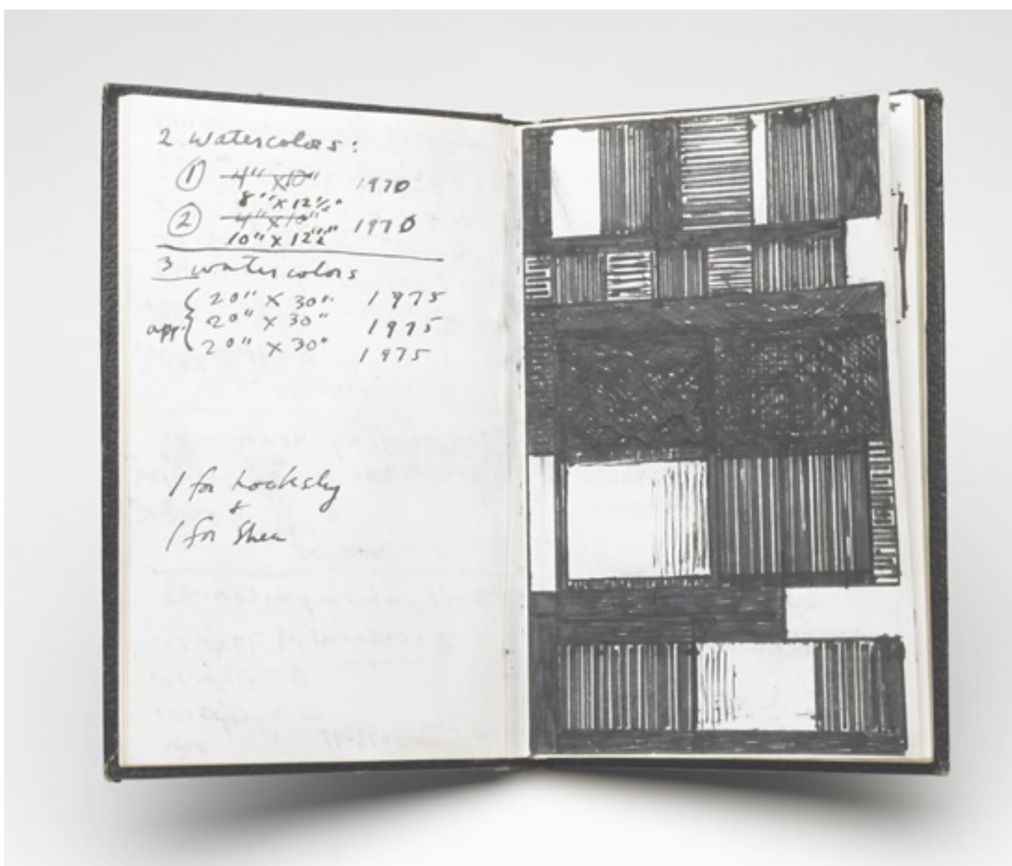
So what project did you do after the MoMA?

I did a singular – by then I was living in New Mexico, back and forth, and I did a singular fresco for a guy in Long Island, in Fire Island. A guy named Bill Turner. He had seen the



David Novros at work on a fresco, 1993.

work at the Modern. He had a house he was building out there in the Pines, and he asked me. And I got Jamie Dearing, who had been Don Judd's assistant, and who became a very close friend of mine, to help me. He had helped me with the first one. I'm sorry; I left him out when I was talking about doing the Judd. But yes, he was there. He was helping me with that one, too.
We went to the Pines. I came back from New Mexico for it, and I guess it was the end of the summer, September, the end of September. We painted there, with a local plasterer, who I had to kind of teach how to do it. He was a pain in the ass the whole time. That painting is still there. It's in a group of walls that separate bedrooms from the living area.
Then I went back to New Mexico. I was going back and forth to New York all the time. I made, in '74-'75, the room paintings. I had the show at Rice of those paintings, and then I was going back to New Mexico. I got a commission to do a huge fresco in an auditorium at the University of Texas Health Science Center. It's three bays actually. It's too difficult to describe it in this conversation. It's a very complex architectural situation.



David Novros 1973–1975 sketchbook | Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

That's the one that the book is based on?
Yes, that's right. I began in New Mexico making studies in a notebook – which was later published -for that painting, and I made that painting in '76

over another summer. Of course in the summer. That one took two or three months. I also made, after that, other projects. For instance, the Newark solar painting, which is an aluminum triptych that opens and closes with the sun, a photovoltaic array.

I've seen that. It's in the waiting room of the station there.
It was visible there and it is still there, but it's been covered, because after 9/11, in a show of patriotism, they covered the painting up and disconnected the wiring so it wouldn't open and close, and put crossed American flags over that area. It's not ruined, though. It's still there, and they keep promising me they're going to put it back, make it work again some day. Maybe when Obama's elected, [they laugh] the political situation will change and they'll do it actually.

Well, when we talk next week we'll see.
Yes, you're right. That would be great.
I did a number of things all at one time about this point. I was very, very busy. Then I think I did – I did the Miami fresco in '83. They were crisscrossing each other, and that was the painting I made for the GSA [General Services Administration] in the courtyard of the Old Federal Courthouse in Miami [1984].

Before we get to that, can we really visit the Rice show, because you did that show with Brice Marden, but also with Mark Rothko, and I'm curious. That's also documented in that book by Sheldon Nodelman. I'm curious about how that project went and what the reaction to it was.
Okay. I had been talking to Brice about my idea for these kind of paintings in place for some time. I was really bending his ear a lot about it. We had a friend called Harris Rosenstein, who had come down to Houston and began working for the Menils, after writing for ARTnews for some time. He was friendly with Tom Hess and a lot of the, sort of, older intellectuals around the art scene in New York. He was a wonderful, brilliant, and funny guy.
He was there, along with Paul Winkler, in a place called the Barn, which Mrs. de Menil had on the Rice campus. It was a corrugated shed that was very flexible. It could be used for a lot of different things. Meanwhile, she commissioned Rothko, of course, and she had extra paintings from the chapel series that hadn't been shown. I talked to Harris, and I said – when he was in New York – that I'd love to do a show that would suggest a kind of a permanence, that thing we were talking about, in the Barn, where you could have a room and the room would be fully painted or however you wanted to deal with it.

I said I thought Brice would be great for this, too, and he said, “Oh, yeah. We have these Rothkos and we’d like to show them.” So it was arranged that the Rothkos would be showing in a, kind of, more or less traditional gallery that was in the art department at Rice. At the same time, Brice and I divided up the Barn in the way we wanted to use it. I made the rooms, Brice made his four seasons painting, and that’s how it happened. Then in the meantime, I’d read Nodelman on Roman painting, and I was impressed by it. I thought he was quite good. So I showed it to Brice, he liked it, and then I showed it to Harris and he liked it. Nodelman was asked to come on board. The show was up, with great help from both Paul Winkler, who’s absolutely fantastic in terms of getting things made, and Mrs. de Menil, who was completely supportive, and a man called Ian Glennie, who was one of the partners in The Texas Gallery, where, at that time, I was showing.
In fact, it was my relationship with The Texas gallery and Fredricka Hunter, to be fair, that gave me a lot of entree into the situation in Houston. They were very helpful, incredible. And Ian, having been an architect, was particularly helpful in doing these structures. I made another fresco in Houston. It’s now in the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston. It’s similar in some ways to the room paintings.
I want to make a point about Nodelman, and about that catalogue, which I consider to be a classic of obdurate stupid art criticism. We hired him because reading him was wonderful. He wrote very clearly about a very complex set of spatial issues in Roman painting.

Was this the Roman – like the architectural painting? Was it that kind of painting?
Well, it talked about the “three phases,” considered three phases of Roman wall painting. It was in Art in America.

Because that one was the work about the Ixion Room, that sort of thing.
Yes. I think those paintings do relate to my work. I relate to those paintings in some way. What’s more, they are part of the Greek tradition, to my mind, and I’m interested in that particularly. So Nodelman came down there with the idea he was going write about 1,500 words. Three years later, he produced the book. In the process, he never spoke to Brice or me about the work. He turned it into a kind of an art historical position paper against Michael Fried, whom he was having some sort of debate with
Now, needless to say, I never really read Michael Fried. I thought that stuff was totally jargon and not interesting to me at all. And Nodelman, that’s where he went with it, and he completely missed the conceptual basis for my work, which had to do with the three rooms that were – it wasn’t three separate rooms. It was meant to be a single

experience. You saw the three rooms through a procession from chromatic field through gray. I'm making it sound a lot more didactic than it was, but nonetheless, that was the important thing one saw
He never even wrote about it. He never even mentions the structure of the painting. It was just completely unacceptable to me. He liked them, too. I mean, there he writes as though he liked them. It isn't as though he's putting it down. It's just that he didn't get it. What kind of hubris is that, not to talk to the artists who make the stuff?

Room #3, 1975. Collection-Menil Foundation, Houston, Texas

Right. That's old school hubris. What happened to the paintings after the show?
Mrs. de Menil bought one room, the middle room. Richard Koschalek at Fort Worth Museum bought another room, and Celeste and Armand Bartos gave the third room. They bought it for me. It was my thought that since two of the rooms were at the Menil Foundation, and the third room was nearby in Austin, that they could be put back together again, and I was hoping for a permanent installation somewhere. But after the initial exhibition of the work at Fort Worth, they were never shown again. And Auping has never returned my – Michael Auping, the director, has never returned my requests for a conversation about showing them again, for some reason. And the Menil has never done

anything about it except last year, one of the rooms, the gray room, was finally exhibited after all those years, due to the interest of the new director, Josef Helfenstein.
One of the rooms was shown also at the opening of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles.

Can we talk about the evolution of that of painted structures?
Yes. In about 1970, maybe a little earlier, I began formulating the idea about making a painted structure. When I first started out, the idea was to make a building with a room inside, and I wanted to incorporate mosaic and stained glass and fresco into the building. The first couple of models that I made were rectilinear. They had porticos. They were fairly traditional. They had clerestory windows of colored glass.
And, about that time as well, I began thinking that I wanted to develop another way of painting, that would be seen in context, in the context of the right angle paintings. In other words, I was going to try to use the right angle with another kind of painting. The same content. I hadn't changed the content, but I had the idea, and I still have the idea in my mind. So when somebody says, "You're not making the right angle paintings anymore," that's not true. I've been making the right angle paintings all along, and I'm making them as we speak. I just want to use them in a kind of an architectural context, with the other way of painting that I've developed.
Now, for about the last 30 years or more, I've been attempting to paint this "other way" of painting, sometimes successfully, sometimes less successfully, because it's a more or less improvisatory painting technique that goes on over 20 years. Now, that may seem to be a paradox, but each day I begin to paint the things, I'm trying to be open to anything about finding the image that I'm looking for.
Now, those paintings, the looser ones, were meant to be on the interior walls of the building that I designed. The exterior walls were to be the right angles, and were going to be in mosaic, because it's the only thing really viable in exterior. In my studio, I began a big series of paintings, using the insides of the rooms, that were to be painted loosely, more or less loosely, as the kind of inspiration for the paintings. I worked on that group of paintings for about 25 years. I never felt that I had succeeded in achieving what I wanted with them.
Then I began working on new models for the architecture, and I simplified it and I got rid of the interior room, and I thought of a way of integrating it into the landscape, a landscape of some sort. One of the problems with this project is I've never been able to find the institutional connection to make it. I found lots of landscapes that were right to make it in, but to do it in the middle of nowhere – let's say in the Southwest, where I lived – I would have to have somebody there to be a guard and a groundskeeper.

In fact, I realized very early on that I wasn't interested in making something far away from people as some sort of a gesture. I really still wanted to make something that could be used by people. In fact, the earliest models I designed were meant to be on the top of a building in New York, and I exhibited the models for that, along with some little paintings, with Riko Mizuno in Los Angeles, probably around 1973, I'm guessing.

Boathouse, Middleburg, New York, designed by Steven Holl architect.

I submitted ideas to Dia Art Foundation and other places, but I could never find anybody who was interested in doing it. I was kind of stuck. I really couldn't go forward. To

this day I haven't been able to find the institutional connection. In the '60s, when I first started, I was very lucky and I had the support of Pat Lannan and Virginia Dwan and the Bartoses, people like that, all of whom I could have gone to, to begin thinking about a university or some kind of other institutional patron for this job.

But by the time I was ready to do it, they were either dead or disinterested. So I'm now speaking from the point of view of somebody who's gone back to the studio. I pretty much destroyed the first set when I made the new model, because the first set didn't apply to it and technically I couldn't paint on them anymore. They were cracking all the

David Novros murals at Boathouse, Middleburg, New York, designed by Steven Holl architect, 1996.

David Novros murals at Boathouse, Middleburg, New York, designed by Steven Holl architect, 1996.

time. Then I re-did my studio, and I opened it up and I got a lot of light in. I began a series

of four large paintings a year and a half ago, which are moving very quickly, actually.
I suspect they'll be done at the end of this year or next year.
In addition to that, I finished a boat house, which I designed and painted in Middleburgh, New York, and a set of five murals for Robert Graham's house in Venice, California. I'm working on some smaller things now. All of this related to my ongoing concern about these paintings that I'd like to make inside the building.

David Novros and Robert Graham, Venice California. 2006

Can you talk a little bit about – you mentioned one of the earlier buildings was going to also include mosaic. Could you also talk about your relationship to mosaic and how it informs your painting, and this idea about painted structure?

One of the most impressive experiences I've had – the thing that impressed me – one of

the things, in fact two of the things that impressed me the most were actually made out of tile. One was Granada, and the way the mosaic worked. They're not really mosaic in the Western sense. Something else entirely different from the thing that knocked me completely out when I saw it – Ravenna in '63, and seeing the Galla Placidia Mausoleum and the two baptistries and going down to Classe.

Galla Placidia Mausoleum, Ravenna, Italy.

I would loved to have gone to Russia to see the great mosaic cycles, but a lot of that was destroyed by the Nazis, and that's another story.

Anyway, the mosaics moved me very much, and, in fact, my father was very interested in mosaic, and had made little mosaics when I was a kid. He worked for about 10 years on one little panel, about 20 inches by 30 inches; he loved the Ravenna mosaics. It wasn't until I went there and saw them that I realized the scale and the meaning of them as an architectural art. I don't think my father had ever – was aware of that part of it, and really his mosaic was about refining, kind of, color idea. When restorers chip away the mosaics, they find that the walls are painted underneath. Each one of the mosaics was painted as a kind of little dot, in sinopia usually.

Then the mosaic layer, who was a different kind of artist – and he knew how to angle the things, which ones would reflect in which ways, and he was the one who was able to bring this drawing to life. So you had a collaboration. You have the person who develops the schema, the plan, the program. You have the person who paints the program out on the form, lays it out, and then you have the person who realizes it in mosaic, which appealed to me very much. I loved the idea of that collaborative thing.

Then if one can imagine being in Ravenna, let's say, in the 7th, 8th century, and going into one of these places for a service at St. Apollonaire, you would have come in, and, of

course, it was all candlelit or oil lamp. You came in and you sang, sang the whatever the service was at the time. As you sang, you breathed, and your breath moved the candlelight. That, in turn, shone on the mosaics, which moved. So there's a certain fantastic synergy between the people in the place and their experience with the painting.

The people animated the work?
The people animated the work.

Since we're talking about these other strands of art history that, you know, are not the Renaissance, would you mind talking a little bit about your interest in Russian painting – because we've had some conversations about that, and it does seem to be important to you.
Well, I'll say it briefly, you know, because I don't know any Russian painting, other than the icons, firsthand, and I love them and they're beautiful, and I won't say anymore about it. But the things I would like to have seen and the things that I've been influenced the most by I've only seen in reproduction. Again, the Nazis destroyed a lot of this stuff during the Second World War, in a wanton, disgusting, you know, typically German Nazi way, worse than the Mongols even, destroyed some of the greatest of the Russian patrimony.
I always think it's hysterical to hear the Germans crying that the Russians won't give them back the gold horde that the Germans themselves stole from the Greeks or the Turks or whomever, and the Russians won't give it back. They're saying, well, you destroyed our entire patrimony, you know. You're asking us to give you back this thing that you stole? I'm very much against the idea of proprietary ownership of art. I think it's really one of the worst aspects of the culture. We've turned everything into an ownership issue.
In fact, these things belong to everybody, and especially the people on whose land they were made, and it ought to be returned and made good. That includes Italian panel paintings that are all divided up and sent around to one museum or another. They should all be reunited to make them as close as possible to the original artist's work.

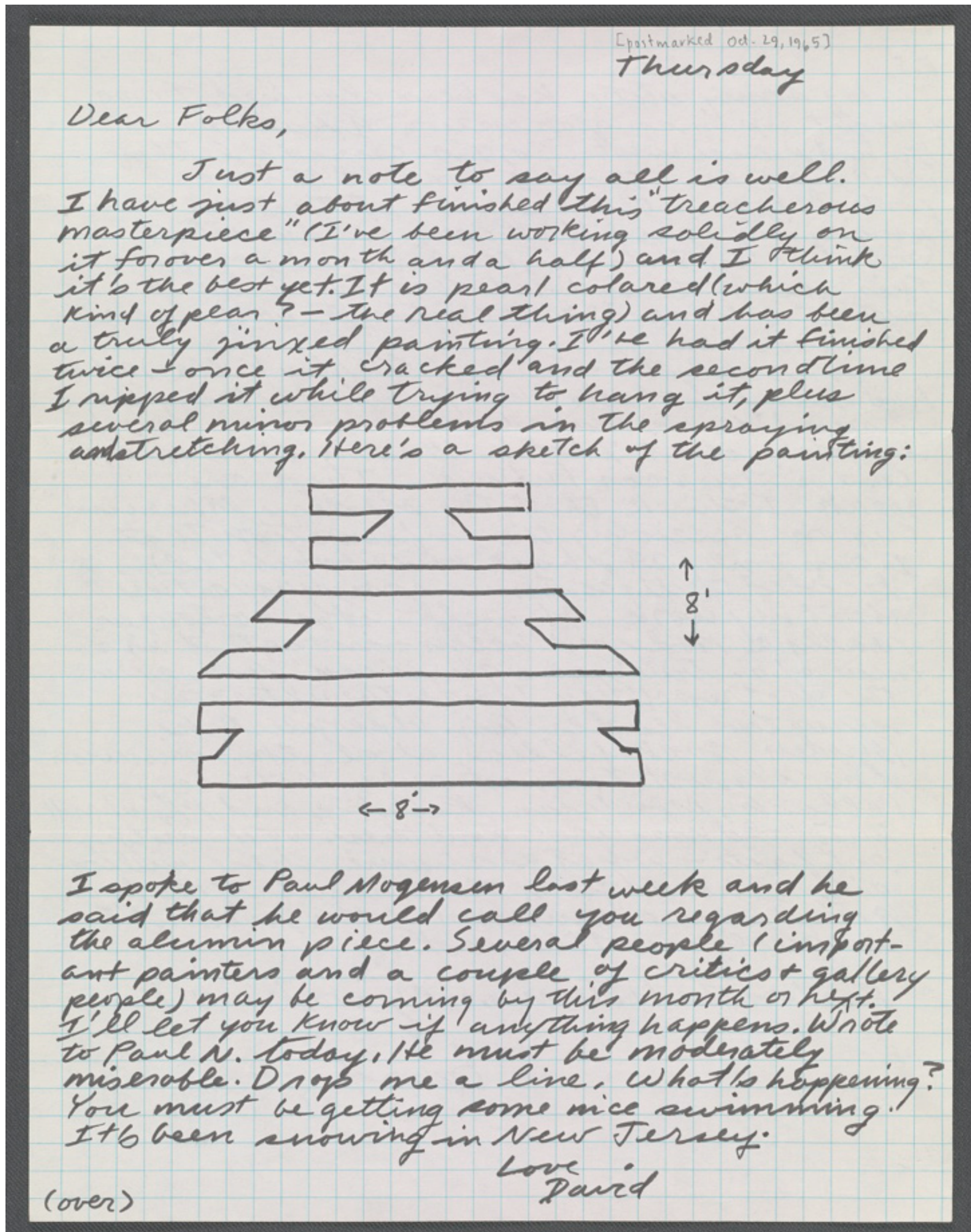
You mentioned, too, with the paintings that you were working on for about 20 years – you talked a little bit about image and how you were kind of searching for an image. I was wondering if you could elaborate on that.
I don't want to say too much about it, because it's a very private conversation, and it becomes made public when I finish the paintings.

Okay. You know, what are your feelings? Like I mean, you've kind of operated outside of the, you know, the mercantile part of the art world for a long time now. Can you tell me a little bit about your experience with that?
Beyond the fringe, my experience with that. Well, I just said, I just stated it, and I've written it in the foreword to the fresco book that I made for the Dallas thing, was that I just don't believe in private ownership of art.

So that puts you at odds with the whole system then?
Well, essentially.
At the same time, I've had to pay bills and raise a family, a child, and you know, try to make a living like everybody else. In the early days, before I was really clear about this, when I used to think that by showing and being in the art scene in New York at the time, that I wasn't really doing anything terrible. I thought it was okay, you know, and I still don't think I was doing anything terrible, nor do I think anybody now who sells work is doing anything terrible. It's just that my ambition is for something else.
I still probably will have to sell some art – if I'm lucky enough to do it – in order to continue renting the studio, paying for the studio, and doing the normal day-to-day things. But I'm not interested in having cars or fancy houses somewhere else. If you're willing to – if you forsake this notion of becoming a star, and being a rich star, if that really isn't interesting to you, then you can, sort of, do other things.

So it's almost liberating in some ways?
Yes, I think so. I mean, it hasn't all been totaled up yet. We'll see when I finish these paintings how liberating it is. I mean, I think I could have probably started working on this building a long time ago if I had stayed within the gallery structure, because as it turned out, I was totally mistaken. I thought I would have to leave the gallery structure in order to do this. But now I see people who are able to do things. Develop in the gallery system, that allows them to get support to do other things. Nobody who's outside the system can get that kind of support.

And do you feel like, when there is interest from institutions or collectors, it's, like, period interest, like they're interested in the work of a certain period? Do you find that to be a problem?
Really, there hasn't been that much interest, one way or another, new stuff, old stuff. There are people who always have been interested and looked at my work. But I hardly ever see any – I never see any curators, for instance, and I almost never see anybody



[postmarked Oct. 29, 1965]
Thursday

Dear Folks,

Just a note to say all is well. I have just about finished this "treacherous masterpiece" (I've been working solidly on it for over a month and a half) and I think it's the best yet. It is pearl colored (which kind of pearl? — the real thing) and has been a truly jinxed painting. I've had it finished twice — once it cracked and the second time I ripped it while trying to hang it, plus several minor problems in the spraying and stretching. Here's a sketch of the painting:

I spoke to Paul Mogensen last week and he said that he would call you regarding the alumin piece. Several people (important painters and a couple of critics + gallery people) may be coming by this month or next. I'll let you know if anything happens. Wrote to Paul N. today. He must be moderately miserable. Drop me a line. What's happening? You must be getting some nice swimming. It's been snowing in New Jersey.

Love
David

(over)

David Novros, letter to Novros family, 1965.

from the gallery world. When somebody does a minimal, quote-unquote, show, sometimes I'm included; sometimes I'm not. I don't think much about it. I like the paintings that I made, and especially the fiberglass ones that were shown in L.A. Museum of Contemporary Art, and I'm always happy to see them up for exhibition.

But really, I'd like to have a retrospective. I mean, I know that sounds contradictory in

terms of what we're saying, but I've made so much work. I've made miles of paintings. You could never show it in a museum, even half of it. They mostly come from a period up until about 1978, when I was producing a lot of work and exhibiting a great deal and showing in museums. The Menil rooms, things of that sort, I'd like to have put together again and seen in some kind of historical context.

And I mean, given your interest in painted structures and even designing your own structures, what are some of your ideas or feelings about architecture?
I have a lot of ideas about architecture, but what I do isn't architecture. What I do is just a kind of a shelter for the paintings. The more that became clear to me, the more liberated I became, because then I didn't have to worry about making a building, and I didn't have to think of it in terms of a building with electricity and water and all that. I thought of it as a shell, and the simpler the shell became, the happier I was.
So on the outside, it's kind of built in now to a hill, but on the inside, it's somewhat like a cave, a cross between a cave and an atrium-style Roman house. Just something that most minimally protects the work, and allows people to come in and see it, albeit without the kind of things that a museum has. You'd have to use candles if you came in at night. That would be the only way to see it.

No gift shop, no fudge shop?
No gift shops and also no "use." No "chapel," because I don't – I'm an atheist, and I don't have any feelings about religious art, other than the old religious art, that's moved me in a contemporary sense. My idea of religious art in a contemporary sense is somebody like Rothko or Pollock. That's just my idea of religious art.

One other thing I just wanted to bring up, since I'm bringing up touchy stuff. Your kind of moving away from the galleries, timing-wise, it almost kind of coincided with the ascension of postmodernism. I was wondering if you had any observations about that, you know, having lived through it?
Yes. Well, I've always been – I have to admit, I'm a total snob, and I have very high expectations for painting, extremely high expectations. It's like that line of Rothko's that we talked about. When seeing the Pop guys, he said, "I thought we got rid of this stuff 30 years ago."

Yes. I don't think that a lot of that work has had very much staying power anyway. I mean, now that we're – now that that period is somewhat historical.

Well, I don't know. I don't keep up with it. I don't know, how much does a Julian Schnabel go for at auction? Even if it only goes for half a million, it's still way too much money.

Yes. Do you find any of that work that came after your generation interesting?
My generation is a very specific kind of a time frame, you know. What are we talking? We're talking from the '60s, right?

Yes.
I know people who are making work now that I think is interesting and good. I don't have the connection with anybody the way I did before, the way I had with Bob Duran or Brice or Paul. I think that's natural. I don't think that's a strange thing.

Well, I think you're very, very serious about painting, and you do have very high standards. I mean, could you go into that specifically? Like, what is it that you look for in a painting, whether it's somewhat contemporary or historical? I mean, what is it that…
I'm not looking for something. I never look for something when I go to look at paintings. "Looking at" is a bad word to talk about what happens when a painter goes to deal with painting. I think "commune" is a better word. You don't look. You're in a kind of a conversation back and forth with it. It's more complex. Somebody who's not a painter looks and expects the painting to do something to them, like a TV screen or a movie screen. But that's not the way painting acts, in my experience.
Certainly some paintings, when – the first moment you see them, the hair stands up on the back of your neck. It's that visceral, physical reaction. For instance, the cave paintings have that quality, the Niau in France, when I saw those recently. Bam! Now that's what I want. I don't know how to get it exactly, but that's what I want to get from work. Other kind of paintings do the same thing. For instance, the Catalan Romanesque, which I've recently seen in Barcelona.
Then there are other kind of paintings that are much slower, that don't have that kind of immediate "Bam!" effect. Rothko is someone – there are certain painters who have the bang and then the sustained thing like Cézanne and Rothko. Then there are some people who could only be seen after really a long period of experience with them, you know. For instance, Poussin, who I saw recently; I couldn't stand his paintings for many, many years. I didn't understand them. I always felt guilty, because I knew that Cézanne loved them. I thought, oh, God, I'm letting Cézanne down by not getting off on his paintings. But I'd seen a lot of them.

You had mentioned that your father was a fan of Poussin.
Yes, my father, too. I just couldn't get them. And then I began reading the Aeneid recently in a new translation, and it coincided with the moment when those paintings were being shown at the Met. Again, I went in and there was not an immediate reaction. But as I stood in front of them, and their lights and their spaces and their poetry began to work on me, I was deeply moved. They had something about them that I felt a great association with, and it was that he knew nothing really about Greece or the classical world, and didn't know anything about agriculture, but was making agricultural, classical agricultural, agrarian kind of images, without any sentimentality. I didn't sense any sentimentality in them, like a nostalgia for another time, that kind of thing. I felt that was a very modern kind of approach.
Say I like a Romanesque painting, but I'm not going to make a Romanesque painting. At the same time, I'd like to evoke it, the same way he evokes the classical world.

Nicolas Poussin, Venus Presenting Arms To Aeneas.

Yeah, a very delicate balance in his work. It's a strange hybrid.
It's very odd painting. They're cinematic in their space and their depth, their change of focus and all that, which makes them all so very modern. But they have a classicism, and I don't know any other word to use for them.

I know poetry – you just mentioned the Aeneid – is very important to you. Did you want to talk about your relationship to that, because – or what poetry you've been reading lately?
Well, I've been reading a book of medieval Hebrew poetry that a man named Cole has translated. It's The Dream of the Poem. Those were new to me, and I think they're great. I read some Chinese poets recently that Brice gave me. I read it whenever I see it. I mean, I read it in the newspaper yesterday in Krugman's column. He was quoting Yeats, and I thought it was such a great thought for the moment, "The Centre Cannot Hold." I had to write it down in one of my notebooks, it was so beautiful.
What I do, I don't write poetry, but I sit in the mornings at my desk, looking at my paintings and thinking and looking out on the street. Or out at the city somewhere. I get ideas, and sometimes they form themselves into a poem, and I write them down. But I don't consciously sit there to write down poetry. Whenever I have tried that, it's been a disaster.
I have poems, and I like giving them to people when they ask me for statements for catalogues, because it's away from some idea about looking at the work through an academic view or an art historical view. They can't pin me as a Minimalist or whatever. If they read the poetry, they'll have a better understanding of what I'm trying to do than anything I could write that would be explanatory.

I mean, a few minutes ago you just described yourself as an atheist, but, I mean, it seems like your paintings have very strong spiritual qualities, at least that's how I've experienced them in the past.
Well, that's good. I'm glad, but I don't think you have to believe in God to have a spiritual experience, a god, a, kind of, big daddy kind of God. I mean, you can believe in, you know, the seasons, as I do.

So you want something more primordial, like those cave paintings that…
I don't know that primordial's the right word. But I want something that I can believe in.

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THE LATEST