Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Interview with Alvin Ross

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

Transcript

Preface

This interview is part of the *Dorothy Gees Seckler collection of sound recordings relating to art and artists, 1962-1976*. The following verbatim transcription was produced in 2015, with funding from Jamie S. Gorelick.

Interview

DOROTHY SECKLER: [Tape begins mid-sentence] Interviewing Alvin Ross in Provincetown on September 16th, 1974.

In our previous tape, Alvin, we had been discussing the period of the '60s. This was a time in which your subject matter had been simplified. You were concentrating or focusing a great deal on subjects which were various kinds of eatables, you know, strawberries, eggs, cakes sometimes, or perhaps not cakes yet.

ALVIN ROSS: No, not cakes at that time.

DOROTHY SECKLER: [Laughs.] But they were very often objects that were small and seen close-up and the space was generally not deep, but rather close-up. However, in one very interesting subject called *Laundry Count*, which you did in 1964—

ALVIN ROSS: That is not edible.

DOROTHY SECKLER: No, that was not, not an edible one.

[Ross laughs.]

You had explored a more open and casual kind of composition very successfully. And we had discussed the fact that the associational content there for you would be something sensuous, not specific. Would you say that you had done a series at that time that had the same kind of open composition? And did that lead on into a new way of handling this still-life subject matter?

ALVIN ROSS: It was the beginning. It wasn't at that time particularly an entire series that evolved. It was just the beginning of sort of groping around for a new compositional element, actually. And I think part of that had to do with several outside influences; one, I would say, simply the current abstract expressionism where the composition was open, a sort of Orientalism, which I'm not usually partial to. I love Oriental art, but I just don't find it generally influences my painting.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Explain that a little bit more, I mean, how you relate—

ALVIN ROSS: Well, most Eastern art, Chinese, Japanese, really are off the page. They run off the page—

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm.

ALVIN ROSS: —as does Laundry Count, as do the abstract expressionist paintings for the most part. In that sense, it's cut—

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

ALVIN ROSS: —in the way that, for example, later on Philip Pearlstein had used his figure compositions of cutting the figure, in that sense. It goes off the page and continues. It's not a new device. It's simply that because—

DOROTHY SECKLER: Degas did it a great deal.

ALVIN ROSS: And Degas certainly did it and Lautrec.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Manet. But it was a very interesting variation in your format. Of course, you were tending to bring, to do a kind of close-up thing with many of your objects at that time. You didn't go very deeply into the space. The eye was carried across the surface rather than into the depth. In general, would you say that was true?

ALVIN ROSS: Yes, I think that's in terms of the still lifes, in particular.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

ALVIN ROSS: I think the backgrounds, for example, were simply foils for the picture, for the objects in the picture. I don't think I was too involved with depth of space or conscious, let's say, infinity of space in terms of many perspectives, only infinite in space in terms of the color, tone, whether it existed as a wall or just abstract space itself.

The *Laundry Count* is interesting because it also is important in that it was among the first paintings where I deliberately intended to paint in neutral colors, more or less.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm.

ALVIN ROSS: In other words—

DOROTHY SECKLER: Did you then go on to the whites from that period until the '80s?

ALVIN ROSS: Much later, yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Oh, it was much later?

ALVIN ROSS: That was '68 I think I began the white pictures, but there were hints of it all the time, even before.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm.

ALVIN ROSS: And I remember painting, I painted probably in 1948 what was a white still life—that was an isolated example—with a female nude figure standing beside it. That was the first excursion in white, and I've always liked the idea of the white problem.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm. Let's talk a bit about the whites that you did around 1968. There were, of course, a series that I remember of eggshell subjects and eggs.

ALVIN ROSS: Eggs, yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes. Sometimes eggs in an egg cup.

ALVIN ROSS: Yes. Well, I will go into that.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

ALVIN ROSS: The challenge has always been—and when I used to teach privately, and it was very rarely that I would take a student, but sometimes a student would come to me and want to learn something about painting. And I would say okay and I would set up a still life.

Along the line somewhere, perhaps in their third or fourth still life, I would give them a problem of white. So that they could or it could train them, hopefully, to look for color where there is almost no color, you see. Even if they exaggerated it, I was happier with that than if they just made it a black-and-white concept—

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm.

ALVIN ROSS: —which is what I wanted them to understand; color is not simply bright color all the time.

And so, it was way back then, including that one still life figure, that sort of it was behind me always. I will say that the beginning of the white still lifes, the white paintings, as I call them, was simply actually a commission that was given to me by someone who wanted a still life of a milk bottle and some eggs, and so forth, all in white. And that began it.

I remember that, no matter which way I walked around the still life as set up, and even having finished it, it looked like, well, I could do it from this angle or I could do it from that view or closer, and it would still, almost undisturbed, present problems which I thought were fascinating, even including in one still life not only the large setup, as someone—I think you may have seen that years ago—called it rather like an altar—

DOROTHY SECKLER: I remember that, yes.

ALVIN ROSS: —with the table and drapery—

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes, the tablecloths in white.

ALVIN ROSS: And I wanted to capture that, and I did, in terms of using it as a front-on, formalized thing and, then, using it in another painting from the side view and reflected in the mirror which began to present other problems. And so, one thing was a chain reaction to the other and still keeping it in the most neutral and, if not white, kind of concept.

That, of course, led to other ideas in painting; for example, the Italian wine liter, which I would like to talk about—

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

ALVIN ROSS: —not at the moment—

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

ALVIN ROSS: —because I wanted to go back to that *Laundry Count.*

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes, yes.

ALVIN ROSS: The *Laundry Count* was also a result of my trying to break away from a more formalized kind of still life, almost as if, again—and these are almost pedagogical problems—what would happen if I just threw a bunch of eggshells or laundry on the floor or threw my shoes and socks on the floor and where they would land. That's what you would paint.

Now that is something that one does encounter in art schools quite often, just a kind of chance thing. That's fascinating. But I find that I also have to arrange. There's something inside of me, I think, that formalizes even what is essentially an informal structure.

And that is the beginning, those eggshell pictures, before the white pictures.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Did they come before the other white?

ALVIN ROSS: Yes, they were before.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm.

ALVIN ROSS: And also, in a curious way, becoming not obsessed, but interested in what is a mono-images kind of thing; that is to say, only that object, lots of eggshells or lots of shrimp—

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes, yes, right.

ALVIN ROSS: —or lots of whatever the subject might be.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm.

ALVIN ROSS: And nothing else in it. And that became the challenge.

DOROTHY SECKLER: There's a kind of translucency in the eggshells, too, that was very beautiful.

ALVIN ROSS: Oh, thank you. It has to do with light and, again, color, but restrained constantly.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm.

ALVIN ROSS: And again, these are problems that I find fascinating still even, and I think perfectly still legitimate in terms of the painter's concern. People do it more abstractly even or less abstract. Yes, it includes, I think, both.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You had already at that time, I believe, worked to some extent with various kinds of, well, fruits, obviously. Still life very often involved fruits. And then, did you at this period begin to do things like the rolls and get onto bakery products?

ALVIN ROSS: Well, yes, exactly, the rolls also. I think probably the '60s for me was a kind of seminal period for different ideas that came out of it. I remember a fairly early one where not only was it simply just rolls, but the rolls were perched in a way that, if you sneezed, they might sort of all fall apart and tumble one over the other, which, of course, was again another kind of challenge aesthetically because of a certain inherent, or implied rather, dynamism within it. Even though it might be formally, let's say, composed, it had a sense of being decomposed. If you looked the other way or turned your back to it, it would fall apart.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Precarious?

ALVIN ROSS: A kind of very delicate, precarious, tenuous kind of positioning of these objects, which

are all logical. They're all there, put by me, the painter, of course, but they stood there day after day while I painted. But it was not an impossible thing, but not likely.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm.

ALVIN ROSS: And it was also concurrent with another preoccupation, which was the negative space. The space between the objects fascinated me, the air that one could see or feel runs through, let's say, three rolls put together, and there's a little opening perhaps, which became, again, architect-tonic for me in the construction of those rolls.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You carried this into a number of subjects, this sense of a precarious arrangement. I gather that this went on into the—

ALVIN ROSS: Yes, and still is, as a matter of fact. One very unlikely painting that I've done, which is the apron and hat just on a very horizontal board, and the apron just hanging very precariously, again, on this board, that you can't see what cantilevers it—

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

ALVIN ROSS: —but it's there, and it was there, two elements.

And again, I find, I think as you said before, some simplification coming into my painting, the complexity, the necessary complexity, that I found years ago in my paintings simply had begun to disappear. And one sometimes calls it laconic in that sense. It is kind of boiling it down to essences, is really what I like to do very much.

DOROTHY SECKLER: The sense of how the object, whatever solid object it is, relates to a space surrounding it seems to become very important at this point, where, you know, it might tumble into the space or it might be suspended in the space or it might cross the space. And you have a feeling, one almost empathizes into the thing, as if it were a living entity of some kind on this spatial adventure.

I was thinking there of a very late morning in your last show where you have a paper bag up on a table or an elevation and, then, some apples that had fallen down on the floor, the tension created between. Obviously, the apples were in the bag originally—

ALVIN ROSS: Yes, right.

DOROTHY SECKLER: —and fell to the floor. And so, the eye creates a kind of alive connection between the two points.

ALVIN ROSS: Yes, exactly. It is a continuation of the earlier precarious balances, that kind of thing. I think Cézanne had a great deal to do with it in that sense.

DOROTHY SECKLER: He did?

ALVIN ROSS: Yes, the whole sense of misplacement of an object, which sort of by its psychological positioning, one felt tension, you see.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm.

ALVIN ROSS: And it has always captivated me in his painting. He doesn't do it always. But when he

does do it, it is quite remarkably convincing.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I would have thought that might have more easily derived from some aspects of magic realism or surrealism.

ALVIN ROSS: Not that I can think of.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Where often there would be an ambiguous sort of thing happen to a shape. It was in a position in which it might be, you know, couldn't possibly be, but it was in something.

ALVIN ROSS: Yes, I can see that, but it never occurred to me that it would be.

DOROTHY SECKLER: It's very interesting. Why would you have thought of it as being of Cézanne in any case? Was there any particular reason you think why you gravitated toward eatable things, rolls and so on? I mean, did you have any—well, this was, of course, during the period when pop art was developing, too, with its sense of the manufactured object. And you did in some cases put your rolls even inside a cellophane package, you know, and you were admitting the modern everyday world into this magic, too.

ALVIN ROSS: That was around the time of pop art. It has nothing to do with pop art, nor had I even thought about pop art being in any way part of what I'm painting ever.

DOROTHY SECKLER: No, I'm sure you didn't and it doesn't have any apparent relationship in terms of how they both look certainly. [Laughs.]

ALVIN ROSS: Right. It's a coincidence of subject, I think, is really what it is. I know that in '62, or I can't remember the exact date, but I did a painting for A&P where many of the objects were the commercial containers in it, that sort of thing.

But the intention is quite different than Pop art, actually. It's simply that they're popular commercial objects.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And you seldom use very up-to-date ones. Sometimes you will use like an old toaster or an old orange squeeze—

ALVIN ROSS: Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: —which are not really the last thing from the supermarket, but more from the historic.

ALVIN ROSS: Well, yes, that may be another challenge one day, to do a brand-new Roto-Broil or something.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

ALVIN ROSS: Which pop artists do.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes, yes.

ALVIN ROSS: But I don't know. This is another kind of subject to probe one day. I've discussed it with many painters who feel the same way.

I remember even when I was in art school it was almost inconceivable to paint any kind of

automobile except a Tin Lizzie or a real old battered car. There's nothing wrong with painting a brand-new car at all. It was just a kind of brainwashing of some sort, I think, but we only painted those old things if they were mechanical things.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm. Well, I suppose that your admiration for Walter Murch might have played some part perhaps in the way you thought about objects. Would you think so?

ALVIN ROSS: Well, Walter's, the main difference other than Walter is a superior painter and a wonderful artist, perhaps too romantic at times, but I think one of Walter's main preoccupations in some way, which is exactly the opposite of mine, is one of decay perhaps, like something rusting away that he loves to paint.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Uh-hum, that's true, yes.

ALVIN ROSS: A kind of dying object.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm.

ALVIN ROSS: And I've painted some objects like that, but that's not my kind of vision. And I do remember even thinking about interiors. And I've painted figures in an interior. And one knows that interiors are not often the neatest places in the world, that rugs are sometimes a little crooked. But I always found I made mine a little bit uncharacterful. I say that in terms of that it has to have a certain kind of character or picturesqueness, I guess is what the word really is.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm.

ALVIN ROSS: And I have often fought against it in the same way that perhaps one day I will do a very contemporary Roto-Broil, a very contemporary piece of furniture. I did a satire once with a cardinal on the telephone with a Eames chair. That was the only real—but it was a satire.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Oh, I've never seen that one.

ALVIN ROSS: It's an oldie. It's about 1959.

But, generally speaking, one finds a wicker chair or something or character in terms of a general traditional realist, which is wrong I know. And one of the good things about—

DOROTHY SECKLER: Why wrong?

ALVIN ROSS: —about the contemporary photorealist is that they do, at least I'm not speaking aesthetically, they do portray a contemporary object, very, very straight-faced and very without any comment, which is fine. I wish I could paint not that way, but include those objects.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm, you would like to do—

ALVIN ROSS: Yes, easily, yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm.

ALVIN ROSS: I see painters, realist painters, who are much more in sympathy with me, or vice versa, and sometimes I hate the paintings because of the objects they've put in them, which is, again, not wrong thinking aesthetically, but I wonder why they do it, you know.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, for instance, give me an example of that.

ALVIN ROSS: Right. I'll not speak of certain painters, but there are even some very young painters who are painting—well, I cannot explain this, but—

DOROTHY SECKLER: What, bathroom fixtures and so on?

ALVIN ROSS: No, no. No. I think anything is worthy of being painted. I've always said that. But there are things psychologically to me I'm offended by, and usually it's kind of a middle-class thing, like a beer ad of an interior. I don't want to say Norman Rockwell, but fairly close—

DOROTHY SECKLER: Uh-hum.

ALVIN ROSS: —kind of realism. And I know I'm wrong; I know that these objects, that beer or whatever, are perfectly legitimate to be painted. I even experimented one time, taking an ad in a magazine, a corny ad, and simply painted it straight, not trying to copy it meticulously, but painted it as I would paint it in the same scene, almost as if one paints from a photograph. But this was a rendering already, not a photograph. And I convinced myself that it was possible to paint exactly the same composition, the same kind of figure, the same occupation or preoccupation of what's going on as the subject, and yet, make it an aesthetically-convincing object of painting. I think it's possible. It's hard to do because we're, all of us, no matter how much we deny it, we all are involved—and I will deny this—we're involved with certain psychological subjects, and the painter makes the subject matter, you see.

DOROTHY SECKLER: What is it that makes doing a modern Roto-Broil so forbidding, I wonder? I feel myself it would be very difficult if I were painting it. But what is it? It has not had the patina, of course, of time. It has not even any sense of use or of being handled. Therefore, it hasn't been humanized in that way. And it is obviously relating to technology still, by the fact that it is so brand-new. Is that part of what you feel in rejecting that? Is it the technological reference?

ALVIN ROSS: I don't know. As you were posing this problem, I was thinking of a possibility for a painting where I would include a Roto-Broil brand-new, and it would be just out of the package. Now that, again, contradicts everything I've said earlier in these questions, that there are certain things I respond to, without question.

I don't allude to kind of an allegorical idea. I like it straight, and I have to respond to it. And I let myself be responsive. And if I don't, I don't force myself. I don't say, well, because I haven't done it, I'm going to do it. That's what you do when you are in art school, you see. You try this and you try that.

But now, I'm at the age where I say, well, I don't respond to it. There's no point in painting young people if I respond only to old people, or whatever in terms of my subject. And so, I know that enough.

But I can see painting in terms of—it's a simple subject—the unwrapping of, let's say, a Roto-Broiler. That would be an interesting challenge from its subject because I can see I could make the subject matter, you see.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

ALVIN ROSS: And I've always differentiated between the subject and the artist who makes it matter. And so, as we were talking, I think it is possible. It's possible in that context.

DOROTHY SECKLER: [Laughs] That will be our next five-year [inaudible], series of tapes.

ALVIN ROSS: Yes, right.

DOROTHY SECKLER: But there was one painting that you did in the '60s that has this more traditional kind of subject matter, which is interesting because I know that you have done, preserved a series of stages. Photographically, you've preserved the stages of your painting. And that's the Italian wine liter. I thought it might be interesting just to have you trace the changes in it.

ALVIN ROSS: Well, I have to begin with why I did it, not why I painted it, but why I made or took a series of photographs of the different stages of its development.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes, mm-hmm.

ALVIN ROSS: I simply did it for pedagogical reasons, because I know that students, even though I don't teach painting, the students know that I do paint and they do ask me about my painting, and I try to show them a reproduction or two every once in a while. And they'll always ask me the same questions: how did I arrive at that? Or how did I get this texture or that kind of thing?

Now students are always preoccupied with textures, with things which are essentially important and elemental, I mean, if they're interested in realism. And so, I thought, well, I'll try it. I wasn't even aware of whether the painting eventually would come out well or not. It just was a chance I took, and I think it was successful. And it was a very conscious, if not self-conscious, documentation of from the beginning to the very last.

I did it to show them why I painted this after I painted another object, the different decisions that I had to make about color. And underlying the whole thing, and it was among the first, probably the first painting where I posed a new problem entirely. It had nothing to do with its formal or informal qualities, though, basically, I think fairly informal, but that's beside the point.

But I was interested in a new challenge. And that was, how do I paint a completely neutral picture, that is, paint colors which are relatively neutral or dark in a neutral sense, and put one only object which is bright and brilliant? And yet, let it hang together, so that it doesn't fall apart.

Now in art school, academically speaking, they would say you can't do it. You have to have a repetition here or that kind of thing in terms of a design element. And this was a very, very precarious thing in itself, not in terms of the composition, but just the idea of will it work or won't it work. And I had to make certain decisions about the picture before I painted it. And namely, that was to strike in what I knew I wanted. And that was I knew I wanted the brightest of colors, and that happened to be some petunias—

DOROTHY SECKLER: Pretty little flowers.

ALVIN ROSS: That's all, pretty little flowers, and I knew that was the bright, bright note of an otherwise very understated grisaille practically.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm. That large area of white tablecloth—

ALVIN ROSS: Right, all in neutralized colors, dark or light in terms of its range, but no other competitive color at all or even harmonic color.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm.

ALVIN ROSS: All by itself.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes, I recall, right.

ALVIN ROSS: And that was what I felt was, could I do it? Could I do it or not do it? And I did document it as I went along. And I showed them the very first stage, which was generally blocking-in with colors that had nothing to do with my resulting colors. They're all sort of umbers and warmish gray colors, just to block it in, to get the composition set in, and without using pencil or hard instruments as charcoal to paint.

And I've always believed, with certain exceptions, to paint, one simply starts with a brush. Occasionally, I will use charcoal. Occasionally, I will use even a pencil, but that is very, very rare.

And so, I started with that kind of warm umber—

DOROTHY SECKLER: These were almost turpentine washes, right?

ALVIN ROSS: That's right and also very dry, so that it can adhere and absorb the other layers above it. And then, little by little, each one began to fall into place, but each element that I painted was a lot of sweat because these are hard decisions to make; plus, the fact of the added challenge was technically I wanted it as pristine as possible, you see, so that the edges weren't blurred or the edges weren't faked or fudged. I wanted it absolutely clear. And so, I did that.

And one by one, each of the elements of the still life were included.

DOROTHY SECKLER: What other objects were there in it? I've forgotten.

ALVIN ROSS: Well, there was, of course, as you mentioned, the tablecloth.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

ALVIN ROSS: There was a napkin on that tablecloth.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm.

ALVIN ROSS: A white cup and saucer.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm.

ALVIN ROSS: A very deep, deep blue little glass vase with the flower it contains, almost black. The Italian wine liter, of course, being pure just glass as texture.

DOROTHY SECKLER: But this came late. You weren't sure from the beginning that you would have that in, were you?

ALVIN ROSS: Yes. Oh, yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You did know?

ALVIN ROSS: Oh, yes, it was all set up.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm.

ALVIN ROSS: And these objects posed a problem. I had a salt shaker with salt in it, too.

DOROTHY SECKLER: That's right. Yes, I remember that now.

ALVIN ROSS: And at some point, I had to make a decision about that background because I knew I was going to paint over the background, and even transparently, which meant, of course, essentially, the wine liter, and there is wine glasses as well.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm.

ALVIN ROSS: And so, I painted that, and that had to be a final statement and I couldn't make a mistake, and it was a technical acrobatic, to be sure. And so, I went at it very carefully and very slowly and made sure that that's what I wanted. And finally, I think it came out successfully.

DOROTHY SECKLER: It did, indeed.

ALVIN ROSS: But, again, it's a matter of pedagogical, the stages, not the painting itself—

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

ALVIN ROSS: —but the stages that I photographed to show the students not how to paint glass, but why I had to paint the glass over the background that was already complete.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Is this pretty much a procedure of the old masters in terms of putting in the grisaille and, then, building up toward, you know, a little more at a time into fatter and, finally, into touches and, then, impasto. And I know that you don't do much with impasto touches, or so on. But perhaps some reflection on the carafe or so on?

ALVIN ROSS: Yes, it is essentially an old masters' technique. By that, I mean it is very sensible and logical. Any house painter will tell you that you paint with fat on lean. See, otherwise, you will have alligators or alligator paint or crackle, you see.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm.

ALVIN ROSS: You can't paint the opposite.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm.

ALVIN ROSS: And so, you go from those logical stages, from a very lean surface to a very, well, not necessarily fat, but at least a less—

DOROTHY SECKLER: More opaque—

ALVIN ROSS: So, it grips. It grips and it's more permanent, yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Alvin, you mentioned edges there. Of course, there have been masters who have felt that, who have presented—for instance, like Vermeer—an edge which has a kind of curious quality, almost an atmospheric thing, almost jewel-like tremble at the edge, and so on; others who like diffused edges. But you, apparently, have always just accepted the crisp edge pretty generally, as I recall. How do you feel about it? Or have you changed in any way your handling of edges where things meet?

ALVIN ROSS: Right now, I would say I would like to paint more with a soft edge. Now I've been

doing that, which I'll explain shortly, in very few paintings recently, but with a different approach.

I have to go back to, let's say, two painters other than Vermeer who you might find, again, use the edges remarkably well. Chardin for one, and I'm speaking of still life, and Cézanne again. Cézanne does in some marvelous, miraculous way get edges which turn and melt beautifully, and yet, they occupy the space. Chardin, of course, has done this with his, well, inimitable technique. Of course Velasquez—

[END TAPE 1.]

In my technical development, just technique in itself, I haven't yet been able to my own satisfaction to make the kind of edge I would like. And so, it leads for me into from the white paintings, which is really a similar problem, into what I call the brown paintings. That's my last show.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm.

ALVIN ROSS: Now the brown paintings, not that they're more complex than the white paintings; it's simply that for more reasons than the white paintings, it presented large challenges. Number one, that brown as a color has been since the early 20th century a rather bugaboo thing you avoid. It's too 19th century or 18th century—no, 19th century.

Another thing is that the color was also, however, neutral, but in a different way than white being neutral. I felt I could get some nuances about cool warms and warm cools. And this is what led me to include so many of the pastries, you see, because they, themselves, were by nature brown or a variation of a beige or brown, that kind of thing, rolls and cakes and so on.

And I was trying to include more in this brown period than I did in the white period. That is to say, the Italian wine liter, which is neutral, but on the cool side, with one bright color, was prophesied in a sense by another painting of the same period of just browns, a brown background, a brown cabinet, a brown wicker basket, a white napkin, again neutral but white, very sharp, very bright. In the basket were brilliant red apples, you see, the only bright note, as one might say the flowers in the Italian wine liter.

There the chest or the cabinet and the background and the surrounding elements almost melted one into the other in terms of values, what some people might call, with the exception of the napkin and the apples, a kind of holistic kind of picture. And here was, again, another attempt at this bright note. And this began to be a preoccupying point, whether it was a bright note or out of value. So, instead of painting a purely holistic painting, which probably is almost a next stage, almost begging for it, I included in my last show either inclusion of something completely brilliantly white in an otherwise very middle-toned brown, you know, or something very bright in addition to it, which, again—

DOROTHY SECKLER: Like the lemons in—

ALVIN ROSS: That's right, the lemon would be that note of—

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes, yes.

ALVIN ROSS: —a bright, brilliant color in the lemon meringue pie painting.

However, the edges that we spoke about earlier, this became the perfect foil, more than the white pictures in some way, of melting the background. So that at times you don't know where the table

ends, where the background begins.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm.

ALVIN ROSS: And yet, the challenge to me is that it holds its place or should hold its place. It's not new. It's not a new concept. It's something that I happen to be preoccupied with and pursuing still.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, that's fascinating. Alvin, of course, the painters that you spoke about, Cézanne and Chardin, however, were more painterly in the sense that they used brushstrokes that were visible, and you have made a point through most of your work in concealing the brushstroke. In fact, it almost seemed to be a part of a credo in a way, that you would never let the hand be seen.

ALVIN ROSS: It's not entirely true, but I have to qualify one thing, again, from a semantic point of view. I rear when someone says it's not painterly because that, to me, involves brushstrokes showing. And I don't think that that van Eyk for example, or let's say Dürer, are not painterly because the brushstrokes don't show. I would say painty, yes, but painterly begins to imply something which, again, semantically in the same way that I objected to subject versus subject matter. Like it's only my own private little thing.

DOROTHY SECKLER: But why do you think that for most of your work it did seem to be so important to conceal the brushstroke?

ALVIN ROSS: Because, again, you would not believe this; I am so indebted to Matisse. And Matisse is I won't say all brushstroke, but Matisse's concept is the just relationship, even the scored notes, but they are just in their own context. And that means that, if the tone is correct, that's all you need. Now sometimes texture is needed by that particular painter. But, nevertheless, the tone ought speak for itself. And to try to not have the intrusion of, let's say, not personality, but the brushstroke itself, the impasto itself.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

ALVIN ROSS: The flatness or the deliberately two-dimensional flatness of Matisse's paintings has always intrigued me, and I've always been aware, even as a student, that the success of a painting does not depend on in terms of space and light on the obvious three-dimensionality of rendering an object.

This has a kind of contradiction again in my paintings, which are far from Matisse. But the Matisse influence in terms of a guiding spirit about whether paintings necessarily have to be technically impasto or not. The flat paintings, the collage paintings of the last period, the early paintings, again, I think I mentioned *Calme, Luxe, et Volupte*, which were flat essentially, again, intrigued me because I was convinced that it was not the texture so much, but, again, the color, the value, the sense of the drawing, even its distortion.

I don't go into all of that naturally, but it has been an underlying influence, as a kind of—I can't say it's continuing tradition, but it is underlying it. To me, Matisse is the most important of the 20th century for that reason.

DOROTHY SECKLER: That is a really provocative thought there. I had wondered if it was an attempt at kind of impersonality, almost as if the picture had a more magical quality, if it seemed just to sort of be there living its own life without any intervention from anyone.

ALVIN ROSS: Well, you're coming to a point which perhaps denies everything I've said so far in this

entire lecture, in that I firmly believe that, no matter how one paints, whether it's abstract or impressionist, post-impressionist, whether they're in the line of contemporary styles or not, I think the creativity of the artist comes through in any case.

So, that even though I am preoccupied with very strong aesthetic concerns, the way I paint it, or let's say within the tradition, without question, hopefully, even to paint it so straight, as I may have mentioned before, that whatever comes out of it is me. And if I haven't got anything beyond just rendering, then I haven't got anything.

And this is really what it is in a sense, that if I paint a still life of a simple bread, and so forth, which is just a normal, everyday object, if I can't transcend it through my own vision—and I don't mean artificially imposing it, but just doing it, and responding to it—you see, to me, is true creativity, as far as I'm concerned, my own idea. Maybe 10 years from now I might be an entirely different kind of painter. But, right now, I like it to be as straight as possible and to be there for as beautiful, not because I rendered it well, which, of course, is part of the tools of my painting, but because I saw it honestly and creatively, I hope in that sense.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Could you take that a little further in terms of what seeing would be like? For instance, well, let's take the apples having fallen out of the bag or any of your rolls that you painted in various arrangements. What would that moment of recognition be when it seemed—or would it exist before you started painting? Does it come about only in the course of the painting? Or is it fair, to some extent, just in terms of how you see what is before you on the table, or however you have arranged it?

ALVIN ROSS: It's a combination of both, actually. It's a combination of both. Sometimes I will arrange things. I have the optics. I like the objects. Sometimes I know that I like the objects, but I would like to arrange them in a way that might be interesting or just not interesting, just plain, you see.

So, therefore, when I say that there are two reasons, one, that I might particularly set up the fallen apples, which I know are dynamic, which I know will create a certain psychological effect. That's one thing. But, then, I'm always torn with the idea, why not paint something, just those very same apples just on the table—

DOROTHY SECKLER: Right.

ALVIN ROSS: —in the same old way it's been done in the 17th century, the 18th century, and yet, bring something to it which is only mine, you see. That's the challenge, and I think the very dangerous one. Because the danger is that, well, I've contributed nothing new. We're so steeped with novelty. And I can see where people will say, "Well, I've seen that picture before." It might be a nude; it might be a portrait, whatever. And that's the great danger. That's the tightrope in a way that one walks.

DOROTHY SECKLER: But, if you succeed, it seems worth engaging in these challenges.

ALVIN ROSS: Yes, it is. It is.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm.

ALVIN ROSS: Because I don't mean ever to be specious, I don't ever mean to be, as I had once been, mannerist in a sense. I think that stage is over. My concerns at this point are quite different. And I don't mean to be photographic. I'm just, I guess, a straight painter, a straight, sober, Dutch

traditional perhaps—

DOROTHY SECKLER: You have never used photographs at any stage, have you? You would never have used photographs—

ALVIN ROSS: I have used photographs.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Have you?

ALVIN ROSS: Oh, yes. Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Okay.

ALVIN ROSS: Not many, but I have used photographs, not for any still life, but for it might be some bit of architecture I might include in a painting or a certain kind of hand position that I might need and I can't get the model. I've done that.

DOROTHY SECKLER: What would you think, for instance, just as a bit of an aside, about the photographic realists today who do use the camera to project the image, and so on? How does that affect you?

ALVIN ROSS: Well, I think anything is legitimate. If they use photographs, that's fine, if they project them onto screens or whatever it is. What I do demand, however, is that it is simply not the equivalent or so near the equivalent of a billboard, you see, what may be confused with exhibiting that object in a gallery or museum as opposed to it being stuck on a billboard in terms of photo realism. Some of it flirts very closely to it, if not actually the same techniques are used.

Chuck Close, for example, I admire his remarkable technical prowess. It's really superb. But, essentially, they are simply brilliant examples of a very first-rate technician that would be hired at the drop of a hat by some great billboard advertising. I think it doesn't transcend anything else except, as some writers have said, the people who pose for him, you see, which I think is the wrong thing.

DOROTHY SECKLER: We haven't talked very much about the subjects that you have done with human beings in them. They're a bit in the minority in recent work, but are you likely in your work in the near future to return to the subject of human beings?

ALVIN ROSS: Oh, without question. I love to paint figures, portraits, nudes, compositional paintings; now that is to say, interiors with figures in them or even exteriors, everything.

I like to do landscape. I think I do landscape least well. I like doing them. I enjoy the physical act of painting a landscape. I find, however, it's the most difficult and trying for me.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I remember that beautiful one of the Luxemburg gardens, in fact, several that you did with that subject.

ALVIN ROSS: It's hard work. It's harder than anything I know. But it comes through, I suppose, but it is just harder. I work at it harder. And one works at those things so hard, you tend not to go to them. And maybe my responses aren't to landscape.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I've enjoyed your portrait heads very, very much. And I wondered if you would like to say anything about the way you think about—well, for instance, there's a series that I

just saw of your family. Is there anything that you would like to comment about your procedure, you way of thinking about it?

ALVIN ROSS: Portraits generally?

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm.

ALVIN ROSS: Well, of course, portraiture perhaps underlyingly is one of my first loves. It's what I did almost exclusively when I was in my early twenties, and still like to do them, except I don't like to be commissioned. I like to paint some heads if I respond to them. I'm being self-indulgent that way about it. There are other people who do remarkable portraits and who are commissioned, but I'm not willing at this point.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You usually do a close up of the head, not very much of the rest of the body, as I recall, though I am sure there are some that are different. But the ones that I remember are the vignettes coming in close on—

ALVIN ROSS: Those are really essentially portrait sketches, actually. Yes, as you say, vignettes. They're not meant to go beyond a certain maybe small area of finish, but that's it, yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: But a seated figure and that sort of thing, and I don't recall if you often—

ALVIN ROSS: Yes, I have done many of them.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Have you? Mm-hmm.

ALVIN ROSS: But I haven't painted a portrait, I think, in three years now, at least three years.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, is there anything else you would like to say about what you're likely to be concerned with in the near future, Alvin?

ALVIN ROSS: Well, as I think I may have told you once, I dream to be a Soutine or a Monticelli or any of those thick impasto, rich, Venetian-oriented, even impressionist-oriented painters. In other words, a sensual painter that I always adore, Venetian in particular. Even the 18th century French, the Bouche, Fragonard. I don't mean to paint in that spirit though.

The sense of color is very important to me. Even though I deny its overt sensuality, I do—

DOROTHY SECKLER: In what sense do you deny?

ALVIN ROSS: Well, in terms of its decorative quality, let's say, its brightness. My preoccupation for maybe 15 years now has been a rather understated kind of thing.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Very simple, mm-hmm.

ALVIN ROSS: Maybe that's me, but I hope one day, when I grow up, to be liberated and paint a nice, rich, sensual, thick impasto painting. But I think I'll do it. I think I'll do it. I almost have not allowed myself to do it in some crazy way.

DOROTHY SECKLER: It would be fascinating to see it, Alvin. I won't despair if you never do it, however, because I love what you have done without the impastos. But one should be able to have a frame once in a while.

ALVIN ROSS: I think the paradox is that the painters I don't particularly like are the painters that probably closely resemble my paintings, and that's something I can't even go into at the moment because I'm not sure about it myself, such as certain periods of Inge certainly, who I think is wonderful, but I don't think he's the greatest painter, or even David or Bronzino.

I'm speaking now about certain hard edge—

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm.

ALVIN ROSS: —brushless stroke painters.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Exactly.

ALVIN ROSS: But there are other painters who manage to do it with great beauty. But most of the paintings seem to be of a colorless kind of context, and I don't think they are. I hope they're not.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm.

ALVIN ROSS: And it's simply this exquisite intellectual challenge of painting within a limited, close reined, and even flirting with holistic concepts.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I wish, for the sake of the tape, that you might explain your use of the word "holistic" here, because it is a very new term in art lingo. And perhaps you're applying it in a way that I'm not familiar with.

ALVIN ROSS: Well, I may be wrong about its use. I feel that holistic is simply—so in any object, a painting, sculpture, whatever, everything is so closely related, you almost can't see it, you see. It's so homogeneous in terms of its, let's say in painting it would be the values, all of them, without exception, would be so close, maybe an exceptional bright tone, you see. Such as Ad Reinhardt with the holistic and other painters, too.

I think during the summer—I have a mental block now—

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, let me say that perhaps holistic implies to some extent that the important image is the overall image or the total painting rather than any of the specifics of particular objects. Would that be part of it?

ALVIN ROSS: I think that's, indeed, part of it.

DOROTHY SECKLER: That you see immediately a total image—

ALVIN ROSS: Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: —when you look at the painting.

ALVIN ROSS: Right.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And the whole is greater than some of its parts in a very real sense of—

ALVIN ROSS: Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: —handling.

ALVIN ROSS: Right. Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: But holistic is also used, I believe, in another way in terms of a work of art in which all of the parts are almost module units standing, extending completely across the surface. Of course, you don't—

ALVIN ROSS: Not necessarily. That would be Ad Reinhardt. But I think there are certain painters like—I can't remember offhand—who paint in a different, more free style, and yet, still are holistic.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm.

ALVIN ROSS: And it's the matter of a close relationship of, in other words, looking at the painting and thinking it's black or brown or red, and it's really all variations, a very subtle kind of thing that goes on.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes, yes.

ALVIN ROSS: It's beautiful.

But what I started to say was during the summer Budd Hopkins gave a lecture on the collage aesthetic, I believe it was called.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes, yes.

ALVIN ROSS: And what he said seemed to, unwittingly as far as I'm concerned, apply to the certain paintings of mine that I spoke about before which had this kind of one almost tonal quality and an object that's completely bright. And that he meant in terms of the collage element as the opposite. And collage to him meant not only the actual literal collage, but the collage aesthetic meant, as far as I can read what he has said, that there was a kind of difference, an application of a different either subject or a different texture or a different color that would be as if it were almost pasted on in the collage kind of thing.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm.

ALVIN ROSS: And he said it could only exist in the 20th century. It's an interesting point. I haven't gone much more than thinking about it does possibly relate even to what I had been doing.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Uh-hum.

ALVIN ROSS: You know, sort of that, well, in art school, again, we go back to the old aesthetic kind of unity of opposites, you know.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm.

ALVIN ROSS: There are opposite elements which can be unified within the major context.

DOROTHY SECKLER: A painting, of course, very often is most fascinating when it does bring into a surprising unit, very contradictory. Well, I mean, it will be fascinating to see what you do with that element.

ALVIN ROSS: Well, sometimes I think, unfortunately, my paintings have become too cerebral in that sense. And I try, probably in the sense of responding openly. Therefore, when I, however, paint the picture, it becomes cerebral, but my responses are not, you see. I think that is pretty much where I

am at this point. Perhaps one day I'll be completely pagan.

DOROTHY SECKLER: [Laughs.] Well, I thank you very much, Alvin, for what's been a fascinating commentary on your work, and I think it's very enlightening in every sense.

ALVIN ROSS: Thank you, Dorothy. It has been a pleasure, of course, always.

[END TAPE 2.]

[END OF INTERVIEW.]