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Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Ruth Armer, 1974 August 14

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Ruth Armer on August 14, 1974. The interview took place in San Francisco, California and was conducted by Paul J. Karlstrom for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

The original transcript was edited. In 2024 the Archives retranscribed the original audio and attempted to create a verbatim transcript. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose. Additional information from the original transcript has been added in brackets and given an –Ed. attribution.

Interview

[00:00:05.04]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Archives of American Art Smithsonian Institution, an interview with Ruth Armer at the artist's home on August 14, 1974. Well, Ruth, I want to thank you for allowing me to come over here this afternoon with the tape recorder. I've wanted to talk with you for quite a while, ever since we first met. Your name keeps coming up in conversation with other people, and asking them who knows things about the San Francisco area, who's been involved in the art scene for the longest time or if not the longest time, at least a good number of years. And your name often comes up. And I think there are several points that are—several things that are interesting about you.

[00:01:05.93]

Of course, you're an artist, an artist who's worked in the San Francisco Bay Area for a good number of years. So you've had an opportunity to watch things happen. You've seen changes here in the art scene. Also, you're a woman artist. And I'm sure that this gives you a special slant on what's happened, although you've indicated before that you don't think being a woman certainly didn't hurt your career as an artist. But these are things that I think would be very interesting to discuss.

[00:01:47.25]

And I thought maybe we could start out with the logical—logical point, which is the beginning, if not the very beginning. Perhaps you could tell us something about your own background, where you were born, and your childhood. You don't have to go into a great deal of detail. But certainly, those things that you remember that may have played a role in your decision to become an artist, those factors that interested you in a career as an artist—so I hand it over to you.

[00:02:24.41]

RUTH ARMER: There never was a beginning or a decision to become an artist because there was no time that I can remember that I didn't paint or draw, whenever I had a free moment, or crayon, or a tube of paint. There was a decision made by my father, and perhaps the only decision he ever made for me, and that was to go to art school. That had never occurred to me because I thought art schools were full of artists. And I was just a kid who painted. So that's what got me started, actually, on the career of art. But everybody in my family, practically everybody, painted or drew. And they weren't—well, one of them—

[00:03:15.44]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Professionally, or—

[00:03:16.52]

RUTH ARMER: One of them was professional. And in my background, further back than I know the people, my great-great—not grandparents, perhaps, but uncles or aunts, in

Europe, had done stained glass windows, I'm told, for churches. I've never seen them. But it's just—a tradition in the family that you work with paint or with your hands.

[00:03:47.37]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, what was—that's interesting. What was specifically your family background? You mentioned that you were—not only you were born in San Francisco in, what did you, say, 1898?

[00:03:59.76]

RUTH ARMER: '96.

[00:04:00.54]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: 1896. I was giving you a couple of years there. [They laugh.] Your parents, as well?

[00:04:03.12]

RUTH ARMER: My parents were born here. And their parents came out in their early life from England and from Germany.

[00:04:13.69]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: I see. So this is you, as they say, blood background?

[00:04:18.84]

RUTH ARMER: Oh, yes, right here.

[00:04:20.75]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: German—

[00:04:21.47]

RUTH ARMER: German and English, yes.

[00:04:24.00]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: And probably the relatives who worked with stained glass were from the German side?

[00:04:28.11]

RUTH ARMER: The German side. That's right.

[00:04:31.80]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: And what did your father do? What was his business? What were your circumstances, I guess—what I'm getting at?

[00:04:40.62]

RUTH ARMER: Well, my circumstances financially were very difficult because we had so much illness in the family that my poor father worked very hard all the time. And it all went to hospitals and doctors. So I, too, worked as soon as I could, as soon as my education permitted me time to work. And I also had to work for part of the education.

[00:05:11.61]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: This was art school then?

[00:05:14.37]

RUTH ARMER: Art school, yes.

[00:05:15.96]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Did you go directly from—

[00:05:17.66]

RUTH ARMER: From high school.

[00:05:18.78]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: To art school.

[00:05:19.59]

RUTH ARMER: Yes.

[00:05:19.83]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: that the old Mark Hopkins? Is that what it was?

[00:05:22.95]

RUTH ARMER: Well, it wasn't the old building at that time because that burned in the fire.

[00:05:29.13]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Oh, yeah. Of course.

[00:05:29.34]

RUTH ARMER: And it was a little shack of a building on the Mark Hopkins estate, where the hotel is now. And the same wind was blowing then as is blowing now. So you could hardly get in the front door with a canvas under your arm. [Laughs.]

[00:05:45.68]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, what a dramatic setting. Then let's see. Well, how old were? You must have been what, about 17 when you entered art school?

[00:05:55.46]

RUTH ARMER: Yes. That's right.

[00:05:55.89]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: And how long did you spend there at the—

[00:05:59.91]

RUTH ARMER: I spent about a year and a half there. And then I went to the Art Students League in New York. And I spent two years at the Art Students League and at the same time, some of the time, at Parsons School of Design, and also worked. So some of it was night school. Some was day school. Some was work.

[00:06:26.28]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: What kind of a job were you able to get that would allow you also to—

[00:06:30.18]

RUTH ARMER: Well, freelancing—illustrating book jackets, that kind of thing, and *Vogue*. fashions.

[00:06:37.80]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: I see. So you were doing this in New York—

[00:06:41.46]

[00:06:41.76]

RUTH ARMER: In New York, yes.

[00:06:42.66]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: —at the same time as going to the League?

[00:06:44.92]

RUTH ARMER: Yeah, that's right.

[00:06:45.87]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, did you view your career leading into commercial art, fine art, or did you make a distinction at that time?

[00:06:58.20]

RUTH ARMER: Commercial art was just to earn a living.

[00:07:00.21]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: I see.

[00:07:00.93]

RUTH ARMER: Yes, fine arts was what I hoped to be able to have time to commit.

[00:07:09.93]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: That's well put. Well, what about—well, first of all, before we leave San Francisco for the almost obligatory trip to New York and study there, how did you find—what was the education like? And now what years are we talking about at the Art Institute?

[00:07:32.44]

RUTH ARMER: Oh, '14 and '15 [and '16 –Ed.].

[00:07:35.68]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. What was it like being an art student in San Francisco at that time?

[00:07:40.43]

RUTH ARMER: Well, it was very different than it is today. You checked in at nine in the morning. And you got there early so you could get a place where you could see the model. Oh, by the way, the girls and the boys were in different rooms for the Life classes. [Laughs.]

[00:07:55.15]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: And the boys got boy models and the girls got girl models?

[00:07:58.60]

RUTH ARMER: No, no. We had both kinds of models. But we never got together.

[00:08:04.75]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, I think that that was very discreet on the part of the administration.

[00:08:09.67]

RUTH ARMER: Very.

[00:08:11.62]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: What about the instruction, though? You started to say something about that, I guess, in contrast to the way you view it now, but more rigorous?

[00:08:21.56]

RUTH ARMER: Well, it was more rigorous. You learned a lot of rules that, of course, didn't do you much good later. But on the other hand, you learned a great many things that, even when you work completely abstractly, are of very great value. You learn theory, which you could take or leave when you got to be yourself.

[00:08:54.86]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Emphasis on drawing then, I suppose you had to—

[00:08:57.32]

RUTH ARMER: Oh, yes. You had to—you started in what they call the Antique class, where they had the plaster casts. And you stayed there for as long as it took you to get some instructor to say that you could—you were good enough to go into a Life class.

[00:09:18.34]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: What about what the instructors? Were there any, at least for you, memorable people with whom you studied at the Art Institute? In other words, were there any faculty members that had special impact, or you felt were especially good teachers, stimulating?

[00:09:39.37]

RUTH ARMER: Yeah. I felt that Frank Van Sloun was very helpful in a stimulating way. I don't think it was because I learned any particular facts from him, though I'm sure I did. But those things are hard to analyze while you're working. The big difference between what was offered then, I think, and what is mostly offered now is that you were supposed to do what you were told, not because that was the way you expected to work eventually, but you were going to learn something from it. And today, you are an artist as soon as you get into an art school. And everybody is very careful not to rub your edges off for fear they would hurt your creativity. Well, in the old days, I think the feeling was prevalent that if you had any creativity, you had it. And you better learn what to do.

[00:10:41.90]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Learn how to use your tools?

[00:10:43.22]

RUTH ARMER: Yeah.

[00:10:45.35]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: So it really was an academic—

[00:10:48.26]

RUTH ARMER: Oh, very. Yes, completely academic.

[00:10:53.30]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And let's see. You mentioned one instructor who impressed you or you felt was stimulating. Were there any quotes, "famous names" associated with the Institute or, actually, with Mark Hopkins at that time?

[00:11:14.48]

RUTH ARMER: Well, Ralph Stackpole was there. But I didn't work with him, because he was a sculptor, and I was painting. And I did a little sculpture, but not enough to take it very seriously, just because it was there, and I like to try everything.

[00:11:36.52]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: What was your work like at that time? What was the look of your—was it fairly academic?

[00:11:45.49]

RUTH ARMER: Oh, it was completely academic. In fact, at that time, I had never heard of anything that wasn't.

[00:11:51.70]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Was it kind of a—of course, by that time, American Impressionism was academic. Were you working—

[00:11:58.69]

RUTH ARMER: Not out here. [Laughs.]

[00:11:59.53]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: No. No. What was it, more of a 19th, and sort of a Barbizon thing?

[00:12:03.37]

RUTH ARMER: No, we had the Exposition out here in 1915. And that was the first Impressionist or Expressionist paintings that I had ever seen. And they were rarely mentioned in school, because I don't think the instructors had seen enough to—

[00:12:26.96]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, so they were probably teaching what, their French 19th century, but not even—

[00:12:33.58]

RUTH ARMER: I think Franz Hals.

[00:12:36.04]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Uh-huh [affirmative]. So it was more of the Munich. This is what I'm getting at, more the Duveneck, Chase type—perhaps "dark Impressionism" is the way it's described?

[00:12:47.95]

RUTH ARMER: Well, the most influential instructor at that period was Frank Van Sloun. And his ideal was Franz Hals, but not in color, more in the idea of relationships of dark and light. And his own palette was very light as a painter.

[00:13:13.54]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: What about the brushwork?

[00:13:15.34]

RUTH ARMER: It's Franz Hals, yes, modeling with the stroke.

[00:13:20.75]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: So did your early work, your work done as a student here, look something like—

[00:13:26.92]

RUTH ARMER: As close as to Franz Hals as is possible. [They laugh.]

[00:13:31.40]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: That's great. And do you think other—many of the other students, I

suppose, were producing similar work?

[00:13:37.64]

RUTH ARMER: Yeah.

[00:13:39.50]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: That's good. That's good.

[00:13:41.12]

RUTH ARMER: Nobody felt that that was the only way to paint. But that's what we were learning from that instructor.

[00:13:46.94]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: I see.

[00:13:48.38]

RUTH ARMER: In fact, one of the exercises that they would give at that time was that you should paint a Rembrandt or paint a Hals, or one way out thing was to paint a Matisse.

[00:14:03.77]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Oh, really? You could?

[00:14:04.58]

RUTH ARMER: Yes, that was a result of the exposition here.

[00:14:07.61]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Prior to that, no?

[00:14:08.72]

RUTH ARMER: Not—never heard of it. No. [Laughs.] But this was an exercise in learning techniques.

[00:14:18.69]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. That makes sense. Well, what moved you, then, to go off to New York? Was part of it the fact that you needed work as an illustrator—

[00:14:30.87]

RUTH ARMER: No—

[00:14:31.17]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: —or was it the attraction of the New York art world and the Art Students League, perhaps the teachers?

[00:14:37.11]

RUTH ARMER: Well, it's every young person's idea to get away from home, I think, which may have been in back of it. That wasn't conscious. But that was the land of opportunity. See, there was no publishing here. And if I was going to do commercial art, whether—you could make labels. I had an uncle who was an artist, a painter, but who also did commercial art. But it was pretty much limited to what was going on industrially here, because there were billboards. But I had never done that. And I really didn't know what I wanted to do commercially. But I just felt New York was the world, and there'd be something.

[00:15:25.57]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: And how did you finance the trip back, with money you had earned,

with—

[00:15:30.46]

RUTH ARMER: Oh, yes. Yes.

[00:15:32.35]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: So you really decided to do it and you just—

[00:15:36.52]

RUTH ARMER: Just plunged.

[00:15:38.68]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, this—I think that's interesting, because I personally am curious to hear your reactions—how you found New York, if it lived up to your expectations, and especially your experiences as an art student at the League. We must be talking about what now, 1916?

[00:16:03.39]

RUTH ARMER: Well, I was about—It was about 1918 by that time, by the time I got there.

[00:16:07.63]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: I see. And you were there two years, did you say?

[00:16:10.74]

RUTH ARMER: Yes. I came back a year and then went again. So I guess I was back finally in '21.

[00:16:19.72]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Uh-huh [affirmative]. Well, how did you find—what was the experience like, the little girl from San Francisco, back in the Big Apple?

[00:16:29.28]

RUTH ARMER: It was just completely exciting. And I had had a kind of proscribed social life in San Francisco. And I didn't like it. And I—the result was that I thought I was wrong. Everybody was different. So everybody must be right, and I was wrong. But when I got to New York, I found there were a lot of people like me. And it was very refreshing. And I think I grew up quickly in New York. I wasn't the shy child who felt wrong all the time.

[00:17:09.97]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: At least if you were wrong, you found out there were a lot of other wrong people.

[00:17:13.00]

RUTH ARMER: Yeah. It didn't seem wrong anymore. [Laughs.]

[00:17:16.81]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, what about the—what about your teachers? You mentioned last time that we talked that you studied with, took classes, with Bellows? And I think you said that you studied with Henri and Sloan as well?

[00:17:34.66]

RUTH ARMER: That's right. Yes.

[00:17:35.93]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Can you recall some of the experiences, perhaps comparing the men as teachers?

[00:17:42.34]

RUTH ARMER: Yes, they were all helpful in very different ways. Bellows was very helpful with color. He was a believer in the Maratta system of colors, which was a kind of paint that came in colors, by colors and hues. And you had to analyze and know what you were doing and what one color did to another in order to use it. And that didn't mean you came out with a colorful painting any more than his paintings were colorful. But they were very exact in the relationships [up and down the spectrum –Ed.] of maybe two little—two grays or two tans. So you knew what you were doing with color. And Henri was helpful more as an inspiration. I can't remember one thing that he ever told me about my work that was helpful or not helpful. It might have been admiring or correcting or—but I can't remember anything that was helpful. And yet he was a very helpful teacher.

[00:19:00.96]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: In terms of talking to the class?

[00:19:03.66]

RUTH ARMER: Talking to the class or talking to an individual—art theory or the social system or—he helped people to grow up, I think. And Sloan was extremely helpful to me in giving me a new sight about modeling the figure, which was what I was doing with him. It was during the period where painting was done with cast shadows—lights and shadows. And he was the first person who ever made me realize that figures existed, even if they were lit equally all around, and were still three-dimensional. So I always regarded that as a very helpful step in my career. [Laughs.]

[00:19:57.80]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, you told me an anecdote about that. He posed a question to you. How did it go again?

[00:20:04.13]

RUTH ARMER: That if you illuminated that figure from every point equally, would it exist? And what would make it be three-dimensional? Well, I don't answer that in words. But I dug it out on the painting.

[00:20:24.45]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: So that's the one thing—that's the chief thing that you remember about Sloan?

[00:20:29.08]

RUTH ARMER: Yes, about Sloan.

[00:20:31.55]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, what about there—well, a couple of questions. I should know this, and I can't remember which, if any, were actually teaching at the League or—and I know at different times, they had their own schools, and so forth. What was the situation? How did it happen that you ended up taking classes or studying with all three of these men?

[00:20:55.76]

RUTH ARMER: Well, they were the important ones at that period, together with Kenneth Hayes Miller, who was a great influence. But he discouraged me very much by telling me I was as damnable as Sargent, and I'd better do something about it. [Laughs.]

[00:21:12.20]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Sounds like a compliment.

[00:21:13.79]

RUTH ARMER: Well, it was not meant to be.

[00:21:16.50]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, was he at the League?

[00:21:17.73]

RUTH ARMER: Yes, he was.

[00:21:19.05]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: And the other men—

[00:21:20.46]

RUTH ARMER: They were all there.

[00:21:21.57]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: I see.

[00:21:22.70]

RUTH ARMER: They were, all that I mentioned, there the League.

[00:21:29.01]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: It must have been a pretty exciting time.

[00:21:30.76]

RUTH ARMER: Oh, yes.

[00:21:31.32]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: No question about it. What other influences in New York, or contacts you may have had, perhaps even in terms of intellectual associations, discussions, relationships with artists or other students—seeing pictures, for instance—is there anything that comes to mind?

[00:21:58.12]

RUTH ARMER: Well, Leo Stein, I suppose, would be of interest. I knew, of course, the Steins from out here. But I saw Leo in New York. And he was looking at my work, and told me that in order to really mature in my work, I would have to have cosmic relations with the earth. [Laughs.] That was the end of that visit.

[00:22:23.13]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: He didn't specify how—

[00:22:25.71]

RUTH ARMER: How to do it? No.

[00:22:26.25]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: It sounds interesting. If you ever find out, let me know. So you actually were—well, did you visit Stein socially or—

[00:22:37.11]

RUTH ARMER: Oh, here, yes, but never in Paris. No, I didn't get—well, Allan was my friend, and more or less contemporary. And he wasn't in Paris when I was. And the others were just my parents' friends.

[00:22:51.54]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: I see.

[00:22:52.86]

RUTH ARMER: Not Gertrude—Mike and Sarah.

[00:23:02.38]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Let's see. Now, this was—Stein was in New York at that time.

[00:23:07.63]

RUTH ARMER: Yeah, yes.

[00:23:08.59]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Yeah, right.

[00:23:11.98]

RUTH ARMER: Well, in and out of New York. But he was living in Paris. But he was visiting New York.

[00:23:16.66]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Yes, of course. And I was just wondering—I thought then maybe one of the next questions I was going to ask you is, I presume that you had probably at that time, a trip to Europe?

[00:23:30.67]

RUTH ARMER: No, not then. Not 'til much later.

[00:23:33.16]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Not 'til later?

[00:23:34.06]

RUTH ARMER: No.

[00:23:34.36]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: So you had already come back to San Francisco?

[00:23:36.43]

RUTH ARMER: Oh, yes. Yeah.

[00:23:37.27]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: I see. I was curious if you had had any contact, direct contact, with European art—with the museums there, with individuals?

[00:23:46.80]

RUTH ARMER: No.

[00:23:47.14]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: But it was all then in New York?

[00:23:50.32]

RUTH ARMER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:23:52.09]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Is there anything else that might come to mind that you felt was—I can't see that Leo Stein's criticism was very helpful, frankly.

[00:24:01.31]

RUTH ARMER: No, it was not. [Laughs.] But I mentioned it because I thought it was so funny. It's something that I've never found out if I have, if I've accomplished that. [They laugh.]

[00:24:11.12]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: What impressed you—what art did you admire at the time? What art was—let's see if I can say this correctly. What painters were admired by the students—what paintings, what style during those years?

[00:24:27.60]

RUTH ARMER: The Ashcan School, largely, and the American painters. We still then didn't do too much about the European painters, though the Armory Show had taken place.

[00:24:40.58]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: But apparently, it didn't have a lasting impact.

[00:24:42.98]

RUTH ARMER: No, not on any of my association.

[00:24:49.13]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Uh-huh [affirmative]. I think it's probably historically correct. Some people feel that the influence or impact was overplayed, the fact that there was—

[00:24:57.76]

RUTH ARMER: It certainly was as far as my experience was concerned.

[00:25:02.28]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And so people weren't interested in becoming little Cubists?

[00:25:06.82]

RUTH ARMER: No, not at all.

[00:25:07.97]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Little Fauves, Matisses, Picassos, Duchamps—

[00:25:09.77]

RUTH ARMER: Kem Weber was about as far out as anybody I ever came in contact with. And that—

[00:25:17.27]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Uh-huh [affirmative]. Weber?

[00:25:17.93]

RUTH ARMER: Kem Weber. I did study with him for a short time.

[00:25:22.91]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Kem Weber, not Max?

[00:25:26.34]

RUTH ARMER: Oh, wait a minute. Max. Yeah, I'm sorry. You're right. Yeah.

[00:25:30.03]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: You did study with Weber, then? Because he certainly was a Modernist.

[00:25:34.62]

RUTH ARMER: Yeah. He was the most modern that I came in contact with at all. Well, that was to be had because at that time, the League was way out in front as far as being contemporary was concerned.

[00:25:52.47]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Did you pick up anything from him? What kind of criticism would he offer? Do you remember him as a teacher?

[00:25:58.30]

RUTH ARMER: No, I don't think he was a very good teacher, though I'm a little loath to say that because maybe I wasn't a very good student of his. And since I've been a teacher, I'm ready to accept that.

[00:26:11.78]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Mm. What did he have you do? Was he interested in pushing oh, "Frenchy" ideas, French art ideas, maybe Cubism?

[00:26:23.16]

RUTH ARMER: I really didn't—wasn't with him long enough, perhaps, to know because there was no rapport between us.

[00:26:33.16]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Oh, I see. Did he let students do what they wanted, and then just criticize the work maybe on its own terms?

[00:26:39.94]

RUTH ARMER: No. Well, I don't know, really, because I didn't get that far with him. But most of the work that came out of his students was like his. But then that was true of most of the instructors, because that's pretty much what teaching was then.

[00:26:56.02]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: True. So what do you feel was formative—let's put it this way. When you came back to San Francisco again then, what did you bring with you from your experience in New York, whatever the context may have been, the teaching or the learning experience? What did you bring back in terms of a style? Which direction were you moving in your art? How would you classify it?

[00:27:30.51]

RUTH ARMER: Well, in a strange way, I don't think it had anything to do with New York. It must have, because in New York, I grew up as far as I've grown up. I became myself in New York. But when I first started to paint on my own, as I look back on it now, I was more influenced by the story books that I loved when I was young, like Arthur Rackham [cross talk] and Kay Nielsen, and things like that. And my work wasn't like theirs. But it seemed to ignore all of what I'd been through in New York. And I got back to something that I'd always loved.

[00:28:15.35]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: So you weren't—you were no longer a little Franz Hals.

[00:28:18.17]

RUTH ARMER: No, no. No. [Laughs.]

[00:28:21.59]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Or Max Weber?

[00:28:23.06]

RUTH ARMER: No.

[00:28:24.92]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Why do you say that your interest, an earlier interest, in Rackham and some of the other illustrators manifested itself in your work, or that you got back to this? You're talking about maybe an illustrative—

[00:28:43.21]

RUTH ARMER: Not in subject matter—

[00:28:45.61]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: A quality of fantasy, what?

[00:28:47.77]

RUTH ARMER: It's more fantasy, and watercolor and perhaps the application of the watercolor.

[00:28:54.13]

IPAUL J. KARLSTROM: I see. So a stylistic thing?

[00:28:56.47]

RUTH ARMER: Yes.

[00:28:58.94]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Yeah, I think Rackham is a tremendous illustrator. We bought a little—

[Recorder stops; restarts.]

[00:29:05.47]

Nope. So we were talking about the illustrators and the—and you seem to feel that in stylistic terms at, least in watercolors, you drew something from Rackham and some of the other people. Do you think this had any connection, though, to do with—it must have—with your avocation as a commercial artist?

[00:29:34.78]

RUTH ARMER: Well, that's hard to say. But I know that the first thing that I did in commercial art in New York was to win a competition put out by the Federation of Arts, I think, or the Art Alliance, whatever that was in those days. And it was kind of a throwback, I think, to these illustrators. And anyhow, it got me the prize, which put me in a position of getting jobs, commercial art jobs, you see, because it gave me that little something to get in the front door with.

[00:30:21.41]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: But you're not sure that—or maybe it's something you can't answer. But you don't feel convinced that the two areas mixed your jobs as a commercial artist, as an illustrator—well, I suppose what I should really ask is, what did your pictures look like, your fine art paintings, your oil paintings, or whatever, look like at that time? Were they illustrative? I haven't seen any.

[00:30:50.60]

RUTH ARMER: Yes, they were all realistic, if that's what you mean. They were portraits from—in a Portrait class, or life drawings in a Life class, or something that was called Composition, which was really pretty much illustration. Those were just school projects. And while I was at school, I really didn't have any time to paint, because I was either doing commercial art or going to school. And when I did start to paint, I painted principally landscapes and portraits after I came back to San Francisco, because portraits—that was not something that really interested me. But that was one kind of commercial art, really. It was a way of earning money.

[00:31:41.81]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: So you would get—you would have people sit for you? You'd get commissions to do portraits?

[00:31:46.12]

RUTH ARMER: Yes. Yes.

[00:31:49.82]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Did you have—Was there much competition in San Francisco at that time? Was Wores, Theodore Wores, still around, working then? Was he here? Do you remember—

[00:31:59.72]

RUTH ARMER: Well, I remember seeing his work in exhibitions at the Bohemian Club. And of course, the Bohemian Club, as I told you, was a terrible thorn in the side of the ladies—

[00:32:13.55]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: As well it should be.

[00:32:14.81]

RUTH ARMER: —because it was the only open exhibition—well, not open, but I mean group exhibition that anybody could get into. And of course, anybody but women had a chance. So that was the beginning of the women artists.

[00:32:30.89]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Yeah, I certainly want to ask you about that a little later. Well, I asked you about—you said you were working. You came back to San Francisco in '21—

[00:32:45.20]

RUTH ARMER: Yes.

[00:32:45.47]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: —and set up shop as a professional artist, I gather.

[00:32:48.92]

RUTH ARMER: As a commercial artist, really.

[00:32:51.23]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, yeah, but you were doing—

[00:32:53.54]

RUTH ARMER: On my own, I was painting.

[00:32:56.54]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Uh-huh [affirmative]. Well, that's what interests me. You were working as a commercial artist what, illustrating for what—

[00:33:03.13]

RUTH ARMER: Here, I was doing principally fashions.

[00:33:05.72]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: I see.

[00:33:06.11]

RUTH ARMER: I did fashions for all the stores because I'd worked for *Vogue* in New York. And of course, that gave me an entrée which I would never have had otherwise in San Francisco.

[00:33:16.28]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: That's good. So you must have been able to take care of basic needs pretty well with the commercial or the illustrating?

[00:33:25.39]

RUTH ARMER: Oh, yeah. Yeah.

[00:33:25.88]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: And then you said you were doing portraits, which you viewed as commercial art? I suppose in a way, it is. But nevertheless, you had a chance to bring tools of the fine arts trade to bear?

[00:33:42.74]

RUTH ARMER: Oh, yes. You must have a technique. And you must be able to draw.

[00:33:50.24]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Did you have a reasonable success as a portrait painter in those days here? Was it easy to get commissions?

[00:33:56.96]

RUTH ARMER: No, it wasn't easy at all. And I wasn't well known. And I was very young. And I —

[00:34:08.22]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Who are the artists that were getting the commissions?

[00:34:11.67]

RUTH ARMER: I really don't know.

[00:34:14.94]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Really? There wasn't a big name—

[00:34:16.94]

RUTH ARMER: Oh, Ilian. What was his name? And there were two Greek brothers who seemed to corner the market. But I've forgotten their names. Ilian, I think.

[00:34:29.23]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Yeah. Yeah, it sounds familiar. It sounds familiar. I think I've come across the name. Let's see. Well, what about—you said you were, at this time, doing landscapes—

[00:34:43.57]

RUTH ARMER: Yes, I did a lot of landscapes and enjoyed it very much.

[00:34:47.07]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: From nature, or did you—

[00:34:47.88]

RUTH ARMER: Yeah, from nature.

[00:34:48.99]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Where did you go, in Marin County or—

[00:34:51.55]

RUTH ARMER: Yes, Marin. And I taught landscape all over San Francisco. We gathered crowds on every street corner. [Laughs.]

[00:34:59.73]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: So you're doing city scenes then as well?

[00:35:02.96]

RUTH ARMER: As well, yes.

[00:35:04.05]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: And I guess there actually was some open landscape in San Francisco still then, wasn't there?

[00:35:08.88]

RUTH ARMER: You can still see one in the Achenbach collection [and in the San Francisco Museum –Ed.], "The Net Menders." I remember that down at Fisherman's Wharf.

[00:35:17.19]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: And what was the style you were working in, or I've pinned down, as I'm pinning you down? How would you describe it in terms of the—

[00:35:28.32]

RUTH ARMER: Mildly Expressionist, I would say, with great love of landscape, more loving of the landscape than of the technique.

[00:35:40.73]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: But simplified forms?

[00:35:44.42]

RUTH ARMER: Yes.

[00:35:51.60]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. How long did this go on? Well, let's put it this way. Let me ask you something more specific to keep on—keep the development going here. Basically, what we're talking about is your experience, your early experience here as an artist in San Francisco. And what I suppose some people may try to do is extrapolate from this, and say, well, here we have one San Francisco artist during these years, and then hope to be able to come up with some conclusions about what it was like for artists working at the time. I don't know if that's entirely possible. But it is interesting to get a firsthand account of just what an artist working, say, in the early '20s here in San Francisco was up against, what the opportunities were for exhibitions, for instance, for getting with a gallery, what it was like to be a San Francisco artist at the time.

[00:36:59.21]

RUTH ARMER: Well, there were very few opportunities. There were two or three galleries that I could recall. Gump's always had exhibitions. My first exhibition was at Vickery, Atkins & Torrey, which was an art store—furniture and paintings, and a very elegant spot.

[00:37:26.50]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: When was that, by the way? Do you remember the year?

[00:37:29.41]

RUTH ARMER: '22, I think. Yeah, I think in '22. And then I showed with Gump's and with Guthrie Courvoisier—had a gallery that was very good. And over the years, Beatrice Ryan started a gallery.

[00:37:54.45]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: That's the one that was at the City of Paris?

[00:37:56.39]

RUTH ARMER: Well, before that, she had a gallery in Maiden Lane and yes, and then at the City of Paris. And I exhibited successively at all these places. And in later years, I went back to Gump's. They were my agent. But I've covered a lot of ground in the meantime. [Laughs.]

[00:38:16.97]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: I suppose in these early exhibitions, I gather that you were showing mainly landscapes or views of San Francisco. Is that right? Or were you showing some portraits?

[00:38:30.21]

RUTH ARMER: Well, and figure compositions. I remember one of a nightclub.

[00:38:35.54]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Sort of genre scenes, then—views of slices of life based on the Ashcan influence?

[00:38:43.67]

RUTH ARMER: That's right, yeah.

[00:38:46.13]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: So you were the ninth member of The Eight?

[00:38:48.87]

RUTH ARMER: [Laughs.]

[00:38:50.82]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: And did you have any success in terms of sales, from these exhibitions?

[00:38:57.15]

RUTH ARMER: Oh, yes, I really sold almost all the landscapes I ever did.

[00:39:02.13]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Terrific.

[00:39:02.91]

RUTH ARMER: And some portraits. That was never a very important part. But I was quite

successful with the landscapes, I would say.

[00:39:15.71]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: So you really started out quite well, then—you—for a young artist fresh out of school. You met fairly early with a certain amount of success in terms of sales and—

[00:39:30.41]

RUTH ARMER: Yes, but they didn't amount to much—

[00:39:33.05]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: No, I guess not.

[00:39:33.98]

RUTH ARMER: —if you're really earning a living. And if you've got $300 for a painting, it was very good. But of course, in the general run of life, it didn't go very far. [Laughs.]

[00:39:49.54]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Of course, it went a lot further then than now.

[00:39:51.58]

RUTH ARMER: [Laughs.] Yes, that's true.

[00:39:55.57]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: I imagine your show got reviews. I was curious, who was the most influential art critic in San Francisco at that time?

[00:40:04.01]

RUTH ARMER: Oh, I don't even remember his name. But you have the reviews.

[00:40:07.99]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Oh, so they're included in the material that you handed over to the Archives?

[00:40:10.48]

RUTH ARMER: That's all that is, just my reviews.

[00:40:13.39]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Yeah, I guess it does go back to the early period. I don't know when Frankenstein came on the scene. I wonder when that was.

[00:40:21.07]

RUTH ARMER: Well, I don't remember when. But I have him from the beginning there. [Laughs.] So if you ever get that organized—

[00:40:28.15]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Oh, we will. Don't worry about that. Well, that—this leads me to the question about being not only an artist, but a woman artist, working in San Francisco. You indicated that you didn't find this to be an obstacle?

[00:40:54.87]

RUTH ARMER: No, I never have. I've never been aware of that.

[00:41:00.29]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: And so you didn't run into chauvinist discrimination in terms of getting

a show or—other than the Bohemian Club, of course?

[00:41:09.48]

RUTH ARMER: Well, in that period, there was nothing but the Bohemian Club for a group show. We didn't have a museum for contemporary people.

[00:41:19.63]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Yeah.

[00:41:19.98]

RUTH ARMER: The de Young wasn't doing that then.

[00:41:22.77]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: But you had no problem getting the gallery shows?

[00:41:25.19]

RUTH ARMER: No, I've always—I've never been turned down. Let's say it that way.

[00:41:34.54]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Did you ever have a New York dealer?

[00:41:36.82]

RUTH ARMER: I had a dealer who's no longer there now, Brownwell-Lambertson. And then I had Elinor Poindexter for a very short time. And I withdrew because I became aware that she was not even showing the things that people asked to see. So—

[00:41:58.39]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: When was that? When did you show—

[00:42:02.05]

RUTH ARMER: In the '50s.

[00:42:03.22]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: I see. So that was quite a bit later.

[00:42:06.14]

RUTH ARMER: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

[00:42:07.31]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: So your career really was focused in the San Francisco area for a number of years.

[00:42:11.92]

RUTH ARMER: Oh, yes, entirely, really.

[00:42:14.35]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: So you were, although I hate to use the word, a regional artist, as most Westerners were at the time?

[00:42:22.78]

RUTH ARMER: A what?

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: A regional—

[00:42:23.89]

RUTH ARMER: Oh, yes. Yes, definitely.

[00:42:26.59]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: But then, as I said, the—most people who chose to work out here found the same fate. You mentioned, again, regarding your status or role as a woman—you brought up the problem of the Bohemian Club, and the fact that it was an irritating situation, that this was the most important—

[00:42:54.58]

RUTH ARMER: Yes.

[00:42:54.67]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: —I gather, most important group show available to artists, or to male artists, at the time. And it was completely closed. You could get in unless you were a woman. That seemed to be the disqualifying characteristic. So you said that an alternative organization was formed to provide exhibitions.

[00:43:18.69]

RUTH ARMER: Yes.

[00:43:19.24]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Could you tell me something about that, how it was formed, when it was formed, who was involved?

[00:43:23.56]

RUTH ARMER: Well, I wasn't in on it in the very beginning because I was away, or someplace. And I didn't really know about it until it was well formed. So I can't really give you the information about who formed it. But I joined it early because I quite agreed that there was a great need for it. I regretted that there was that need because even then, I felt that there shouldn't be any difference between one kind of art and another kind of art. And I always showed in galleries that handled men or women.

But there was a need for group shows of some kind, so that new people could be introduced to the public. And so I joined it. And for many years, I worked with them on the board, all that. But then I finally dropped out, because it seemed to me that there was no longer any need for such an organization. The Art Institute at that time was putting on group shows at the San Francisco Museum. There was then—the outdoor art festival was going on where people could be discovered. And I didn't see any reason to segregate women after that.

[00:44:46.37]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, do you have any idea when the women's organization—what was the name of it, first of all?

[00:44:54.02]

RUTH ARMER: San Francisco Women Artists. It started into something called the Sketch Club.

[00:44:58.79]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Do you remember—do you have any idea about when that was, '20s?

[00:45:03.08]

RUTH ARMER: No. "When" is a bad word for me. [They laugh.]

[00:45:09.02]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: I'll use it again. Do you remember when you joined, more or less?

[00:45:13.55]

RUTH ARMER: Well, no, I don't really, see—

[00:45:16.61]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: It was early on in the '20s, or in the '30s? Maybe we'll have to let that—

[00:45:22.37]

RUTH ARMER: No, I don't think it—it wasn't anything like—as early as that for me. I see I've got awards from them in '44, '45, '47. So let's say early '40s, I probably joined them. And how long they were functioning before that, I really don't know.

[00:45:43.22]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Where were these shows held? Did they have a—

[00:45:45.29]

RUTH ARMER: At the San Francisco Museum.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Oh, at the Museum. I see. Do you feel it performed—well, obviously, it must have performed an important service, at least in the early years—

[00:45:57.16]

RUTH ARMER: Oh, yes, it did.

[00:45:59.59]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: —before there were other group shows, open group shows, available?

[00:46:02.98]

RUTH ARMER: Yes. And it had another purpose, too, another value. And that is it showed crafts as well as art. That's a bad way of separating the two. But they showed weaving and jewelry and ceramics. And there was no place to show those things. The Art Association, even when they put on their group shows, didn't show those things.

[00:46:29.20]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: I see.

[00:46:30.94]

RUTH ARMER: I think at that time, those were things just women did. [Laughs.]

[00:46:38.33]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, what about your experience as a teacher? You indicated that you taught at the—what's now the Art Institute. Maybe when you started teaching it was called the California School of Fine Arts.

[00:46:50.39]

RUTH ARMER: Well, I had a school of my own first.

[00:46:53.30]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Oh, you did?

[00:46:53.90]

RUTH ARMER: Yeah. Well, I called it a school because I had about 60 students.

[00:47:00.53]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Sounds like school to me.

[00:47:01.61]

RUTH ARMER: It's a school, yeah. And I did that for several years. And I taught at the Jewish Center, a night class, and then at the Art Institute later on. But I taught too much. During the time I was teaching, I was teaching so intensively that it was bad for my own work, partly because I didn't have enough time to think about it, and partly because I was saying the same things over and over again to people who needed to hear them. But the things were no longer important in my creative work, or shouldn't have been. So I finally stopped teaching.

[00:47:57.54]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: I hate to ask you when. But I'm obligated to do it.

[00:48:00.86]

RUTH ARMER: That, I think, was '41. That I think I do know. That was very important moment.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: When you stopped teaching.

RUTH ARMER: I think so, yes.

[00:48:07.73]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: And do you have any idea when you opened up your own school, or any idea of the chronology involved there?

[00:48:18.38]

RUTH ARMER: Yes, about '31, I would say, '32.

[00:48:24.47]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: So there was a period of what, over a decade that you were an art teacher?

[00:48:30.42]

RUTH ARMER: Yeah. There was a very important and devastating period just before I opened my own school. And that is I took a job for five or six years as a stylist, where I had to run to New York all the time and decide what next year's fashions were going to be. And if everything turned out fine and everything sold, the buyers were great buyers. And if something didn't sell, it was because I said it was what they should do. [Laughs.]

[00:49:02.94]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Who did you do that for?

[00:49:03.84]

RUTH ARMER: H. Liebes and Company. And it was after that that I started teaching. And I really loved teaching.

[00:49:18.02]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: In your school, did you have other people working with you, or did you handle all 60—

[00:49:21.46]

RUTH ARMER: No, it was just what I could handle myself.

[00:49:24.52]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: That sounds like a—more than a full-time—

[00:49:26.57]

RUTH ARMER: Well, they didn't all come every period. I would go down the Peninsula and teach a group. And I'd go to the Jewish Center and teach a group. And then I had a big studio where I'd have morning and afternoon classes. So that is a rat race. [Laughs.]

[00:49:47.96]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: You were a peripatetic school. You were moving around—

[00:49:51.04]

RUTH ARMER: Yes. Oh, yes, it was very difficult, but, in a way, very satisfying in one way.

[00:49:59.53]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Did you adopt teaching methods that you yourself had experienced based on your experience at the League?

[00:50:08.14]

RUTH ARMER: No, I tried to do something that I quite realize is impossible to do. But I tried to get inside each student's head. And to the best of my ability, I taught that way.

[00:50:22.13]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: This sounds maybe a little bit like at least the Henri ideal of bringing out the special qualities—of helping to liberate special qualities of the student.

[00:50:36.95]

RUTH ARMER: Maybe that was part of what I did. Well, I didn't know. It has to do with flowing along with people. And you could tell a student that blue and yellow made green a hundred times. And all of a sudden, they'd say, "Oh, blue and yellow makes green. Why didn't you ever tell me that?" So it was, hopefully, the kind of teaching that told them that at the moment when they were ready to receive it, all of which is very tiring.

[00:51:18.07]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Did you turn out a bunch of little Ashcan painters?

[00:51:20.77]

RUTH ARMER: [Laughs.] No.

[00:51:28.84]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, where were your studios? I imagine you probably were located at different places in the city at various times.

[00:51:35.23]

RUTH ARMER: Yes—well, at two different places. One of them was that place with the cupola down here on Broadway. See the little white cupola? Go look down Broadway. You want to turn the machine off?

[00:51:48.82]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: No, no. That doesn't matter. See, that's—where's Broadway? That's Broadway?

[00:51:53.35]

RUTH ARMER: This is Broadway, this street. Go up the hill. And see the little white dome?

[00:51:58.21]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: I think so.

[00:52:00.22]

RUTH ARMER: If you were looking at it, you'll see it very clear. It's on the hill. It goes up. It's on the left-hand side of the street. There's a green roof with a little white dome on it.

[00:52:11.23]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Oh, yeah, I think so. Uh-huh [affirmative].

[00:52:13.27]

RUTH ARMER: That was one. And then around on Fillmore and Pacific, there was a house that we moved into.

[00:52:20.65]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: So right at—right—well, at least within eyeshot.

[00:52:24.13]

RUTH ARMER: I've never lived anyplace except Broadway. [Laughs.]

[00:52:27.10]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, that's sort of nice. It must give you a sense of stability. Now, you were you married at the time?

[00:52:35.71]

RUTH ARMER: Not when I was there, no. No, I stopped teaching pretty much after I was married.

[00:52:41.78]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: I see.

[00:52:43.72]

RUTH ARMER: I wasn't married to Joe Bransten then. It was Joe O'Connor.

[00:52:49.44]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Two Joes?

[00:52:50.49]

RUTH ARMER: Yeah, confusing. [Laughs.]

[00:52:56.88]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Let's see what else we have here. Well, I don't know if there's anything more you can say or want to say about your experience as a teacher, although I know that you do have deeply felt ideas about the teaching of art, and about what you feel to be some problems with current art instruction.

[00:53:27.38]

RUTH ARMER: Yes.

[00:53:28.41]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Would you like to say anything about that?

[00:53:34.14]

RUTH ARMER: Well, I was—there's not much I can say. I stayed on the board of the Art Institute until about a year and a half, or two years ago. I resigned because when I was no longer teaching, I was still deeply interested in teaching, see, in students, and what they got. I think that what I feel is that I must perhaps be my age. And if I don't agree with

everything that's being handed out now, I cannot really say it's wrong. But on the other hand, I can't flow with it.

[00:54:22.59]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And you mean the lack of direction and discipline, primarily?

[00:54:29.16]

RUTH ARMER: Yes.

[00:54:29.91]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, there's certainly a lot of people who agree with you on that. Although I've never taught art, I've taken a certain number of studio courses. I think I would tend to agree with you as well. I certainly wonder—I think I said this last week when I was over here. I certainly can't understand what a graduate degree in painting or sculpture means, exactly. I can't figure that out, except that it may get you a teaching job. But I think the important point in this context, anyway, is the fact that you sense a lack of familiarity with the tools of the trade, and with the discipline.

[00:55:20.36]

RUTH ARMER: Yeah, and the lack of caring about it. Well, maybe somebody should—would have to tell them to care about it, that it would be important. But there is a philosophy now that things shouldn't last, that they shouldn't be durable. I mean the paintings and sculpture and all that. It falls apart, so what? That's only one little thing that I can't go along with. But it's part of the whole.

[00:55:52.61]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Do you mean—you're talking about art that isn't object-oriented, the—

[00:56:01.01]

RUTH ARMER: Well, I don't believe in selling a painting where next year the paint is going to crack—

[00:56:05.33]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. I see.

[00:56:05.45]

RUTH ARMER: —and fall off the canvas, that kind of thing, since there is a way of knowing how to put it on so it won't fall off.

[00:56:12.11]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. I understand. How do you feel about—carrying a little further, though, how do you feel about conceptual art, non-object-oriented art that we're saying so much about—

[00:56:26.04]

RUTH ARMER: Well, I think some of it's great fun. It's very interesting. I think the terminology bothers me a little, like, good old question, "what is art?" I don't know what it is, either. But I don't think it's that.

[00:56:43.01]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: I'm glad to hear you say that. I still can't figure out what art is.

[00:56:45.26]

RUTH ARMER: No. That is, I can't say that I have an answer to it, either. But I don't know where conceptual art ends. I don't know if I eat scrambled eggs—if that isn't conceptual art,

too.

[00:56:59.12]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Oh, I think so.

[00:57:00.38]

RUTH ARMER: Yeah, I mean anything.

[00:57:02.24]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: No, I think so, especially in your case. You're an artist. You're established as an artist. And if you choose to dignify the act of eating your scrambled eggs by calling it artwork, I think that there were plenty—if you were to follow it to a logical—

[00:57:16.97]

RUTH ARMER: Yes, it's as good as any other conceptual art. I don't know any standards by which to judge.

[00:57:25.04]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: No, I think that's a real problem. And I imagine, getting back to the Art Institute, that they're in a difficult position, or at least they've allowed themselves to become—they're finding themselves in a difficult position, because they have to somehow deal with—after all, conceptual art is in the journals.

[00:57:49.31]

RUTH ARMER: Oh, it's here.

[00:57:51.19]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: A lot of people are getting big reputations, or at least they're famous because of it. And so naturally, the students say, "Why bother with all this crap when I can move on to—"

[00:57:59.87]

RUTH ARMER: Yeah. It's a very difficult period for an art school, I think. I do also think that there isn't any particular need in education to go along with every fashion that comes up. I still think that there are things that can be learned, and then leave school and do what you want, with, perhaps, an ability. And it can be conceptual art. But I don't see any reason for it in a school, since I can't see what can be taught about it.

[00:58:34.16]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: [Laughs.] I think that's a good point. It's like signing up for a class in Conceptual Art 1A or something.

[00:58:42.53]

RUTH ARMER: [Laughs] Yes.

[00:58:43.04]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, you'll probably find this amusing. From the conversation I had the other night at the interview with Bruce Conner, he told about a class that he taught at the Art Institute. I can't remember when exactly, '64? Anyway, he was there for a short period. And the class he wanted to teach was to be listed in the catalog as "Wasted Time; Instructor, Bruce Conner." And yet, Fred Martin wouldn't let him do that because he said, "How can I explain this, Wasted Time?" So they called it something else, Undergraduate Seminar in Art. But of course, Bruce Conner, true to himself and true to the—his course description, taught it as "Wasted Time." I think that fits in a little bit with what we're—

[00:59:40.97]

RUTH ARMER: Well, I'm very uptight about charging large fees for wasted time. This is my upbringing.

[00:59:50.60]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Uh-huh. [affirmative]. But it wasn't entirely wasted.

[00:59:52.19]

RUTH ARMER: No, no. I'm sure with Bruce, it would not be.

[00:59:55.46]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, I'm not sure. It must have at least been stimulating—

[00:59:58.58]

RUTH ARMER: That's it.

[00:59:58.91]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: —whether or not that—Although I don't want to waste all of your tape time on this story, I think it's amusing. They did a number of different things. They'd sit around and rap, and have fantasies during class time. And then at the end of the semester, or whatever system they were on, they had a model fund, a model allowance. And they hadn't used it at all in "Wasted Time." And so he decided to use it all for the last meeting. And he hired 14 models.

[01:00:28.56]

RUTH ARMER: I know. I heard it.

[01:00:29.45]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Did you hear about it? Oh, good. Then it really did happen. So Bruce wasn't lying to—

[01:00:34.70]

RUTH ARMER: Well, I heard the story. I didn't see it happen.

[01:00:37.82]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: But I'll have to admit at least the last session, to my mind, wasn't wasted time. I think I would have enjoyed being there.

[01:00:44.54]

RUTH ARMER: [Laughs.]

[01:00:47.70]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Let's see—

[END OF TRACK AAA_armer74_7947_m]

[00:00:04.32]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Ruth Armer, side two—so that then allows us to get started again. I was hoping that you would be willing to provide a few observations on your own work, your own development as an artist, and, I suppose more specifically, obviously, your style. Your sensibility, to a certain extent, has changed over the years—certainly, the look of your work. And I was wondering if you could talk about this a little bit, about your own concerns, what you feel you're dealing with as an artist, and then perhaps even mention if you feel there are any specific influences, sources, for your own style and work.

[00:01:07.52]

RUTH ARMER: Well, it seems to me that over the years, I've been interested in the same things, though the work looks very different. But I think my primary interest is the organization of the space on which I'm working, in three dimensions, which, of course, is a translation right there, and not always fashionable. And my other great interest is in the color relationships that produce these dimensions. And the fact that it looks very different now from the way it looked when I was perhaps more influenced by the Abstract Expressionist technique is—there are two reasons.

One is that it's now simplified. And the other reason is that I'm using acrylic paint, which makes you feel different in the application of the paint. And when I use oil, I'm accustomed to feeling very lush, and like to throw it on with a knife. Now I'm using acrylic, which is a more exact and exacting technique. And I like it because it makes me say what I have to say very much more simply. What else can I say about my painting?

[00:02:44.62]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, do you feel then that your—that the look of your art, the form of your art, has changed over the years, which is, of course, to be expected, but that your basic concerns are very similar to what they were when you were producing landscapes? Would you go that far?

[00:03:06.12]

RUTH ARMER: Perhaps not. It isn't so easy to do when you're doing realistic things, because you're bound by certain areas.

[00:03:17.94]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Local color?

[00:03:19.03]

RUTH ARMER: Well, not only local color. But even in space relationship, you have a horizon, or you have a middle distance or something. And you can't always juggle it as exactly as you can if you're being non-representational. There, you're the boss.

[00:03:38.49]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Right.

[00:03:38.94]

RUTH ARMER: Complete boss.

[00:03:39.72]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: But on the other hand, when you're painting a landscape, it's possible to do a certain amount of violence to nature—

[00:03:47.79]

RUTH ARMER: Oh, of course.

[00:03:48.18]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: —and to use relatively arbitrary color, for instance.

[00:03:52.68]

RUTH ARMER: You can do all of that. But it's never—you're never as free as if you're not doing a landscape, or not being representational. This is why I have left that behind. Maybe someday I'll go back and feel I can do that.

[00:04:11.04]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Did you have an interest in your early representational work? Let me ask you this. Were you working in a representational manner up to, say, your interest in Abstract Expressionism, which I suppose was in the late '40s, I was guessing?

[00:04:27.44]

RUTH ARMER: Yeah. No, I started doing non-representational work in 1930.

[00:04:36.66]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: In 1930?

[00:04:37.68]

RUTH ARMER: Yeah.

[00:04:38.37]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Now, that's very interesting. How did that come about? There must have been a point of departure there.

[00:04:43.41]

RUTH ARMER: Well, there was. I was sick. And I was sent down to the desert all by myself. And the doctor said, "Don't bring your paints. You can't take anything with you. Stay in bed."

[00:04:57.18]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Where did you go?

[00:04:58.59]

RUTH ARMER: Down to Redlands. And so I sneaked some watercolors with me. But I had nothing to paint. I was in a little white room in a little white bed. And I'd always been accustomed to painting something. And there was nothing. But there was somebody in the next room with a record player. And I was listening to music all the time. And this started me off on doing non-representational color things, moods that the music would induce. And I had non-representational paintings when I was finished. I had a show of them in New York in the Cleveland Museum, those paintings that—[Distant bell sounding] Is that the telephone?

[00:05:51.45]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: That's a siren. Oh, no.

[00:05:52.23]

RUTH ARMER: That's outside, someplace.

[00:05:55.14]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, what were they like? Were they sort of pre-Abstract Expressionists? Was it a free type painting, a more geometric—

[00:06:07.35]

RUTH ARMER: Yes. Well, "Bach" was very geometric. But the others were free. And I had a very interesting experience in that New York show where the—somebody told me, the gallery man told me that a musician from the symphony had come in and looked at the show, and had named each composer. Now, of course, I didn't—as far as I'm concerned, this was no translation of bars of music into color. But the mood was sufficiently different, I guess. But I was told that that happened.

[00:06:54.53]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: What were some of the pieces—or rather, composers? Bach, you mentioned.

[00:06:59.12]

RUTH ARMER: Yes.

[00:06:59.49]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: I can see—

[00:07:00.05]

RUTH ARMER: "Mozart" was different again, gentle.

[00:07:02.99]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: What about a Romantic composer? Was there a Romantic picture based on a Romantic piece?

[00:07:08.15]

RUTH ARMER: No. Well, there was "Wagner," which I guess was a bombastic piece. And who's "The Firebird"?

[00:07:19.62]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Stravinsky.

[00:07:20.64]

RUTH ARMER: Stravinsky.

[00:07:21.98]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, that must have been a really agitated painting.

[00:07:24.06]

RUTH ARMER: Yes.

[00:07:24.96]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Like Gorky.

[00:07:25.77]

RUTH ARMER: So I think I chose composers that perhaps were sufficiently different in mood so that this was not second sight. But anyhow, I stopped doing music, working from music, as soon as I got out of that atmosphere.

[00:07:43.65]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: But did they have that—liberated your—that experience liberated—

[00:07:47.56]

RUTH ARMER: Yes. Then I realized that I was interested primarily in form and color. You see, it didn't have to be subject matter. This is what opened the window for me.

[00:08:00.11]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: And then you continued to work in a non-objective manner, and did the —and this was during the 1930s then?

[00:08:11.33]

RUTH ARMER: '30s, yeah.

[00:08:12.95]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: That's very interesting. Well, then when Abstract Expressionism came on the scene—certainly, there's been a lot written about its arrival here, or maybe even co-development along with what was going on in New York, due to the situation at the Art Institute—did this modify your work at all? Was there any influence from what was happening at the Art Institute, or the presence of Clyfford Still, for instance, and your own work?

[00:08:48.68]

RUTH ARMER: Well, I never worked with them. But I think yes, I was influenced. I guess you can't help but be. Well, yes, you can help, because I'm not influenced by what's going on now. [Laughs.]

[00:09:03.44]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Yeah. But still, it would have struck a respondent, sympathetic chord.

[00:09:06.53]

RUTH ARMER: But it was so close, really, to what I was doing, anyhow.

[00:09:11.48]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Did your scale—the scale of your work increase at all? It's supposed to be one of the—

[00:09:16.19]

RUTH ARMER: Yes. Well, it never got very big, no.

[00:09:20.96]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Because I imagine these early abstractions—of course, the circumstances, were watercolors—

[00:09:23.63]

RUTH ARMER: They were watercolors because I was working in bed.

[00:09:29.18]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: They were little things.

[00:09:29.63]

RUTH ARMER: Yes. But I've never worked very large. The one in the dining room is the biggest, the three-ply, that I've ever used.

[00:09:40.70]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Did you—But you were still concerned—you mentioned another one of your concerns being three-dimensional space, pictorial space. And of course, that's given with a landscape.

[00:09:53.97]

RUTH ARMER: Yeah.

[00:09:54.59]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: But when you arrive at abstraction, it's possible, if you're following the example, or at least of the problems posed by the Cubist, for instance, of really playing with that, and compressing. It was this a concern of yours, of really controlling the pictorial space and creating a shallow space where you're dealing with these formal problems?

[00:10:20.99]

RUTH ARMER: Yes, never as problems, perhaps, but as a choice of subject matter. My subject would be the division of that space—

[00:10:35.90]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: I see.

[00:10:36.08]

RUTH ARMER: —and the relationships of the color.

[00:10:38.15]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: And so with abstract forms, you would still—you chose to create, well, maybe a three-level thing—a background, a middle ground, and a foreground—and the non-representational shapes and colors existing on different planes?

[00:11:00.03]

RUTH ARMER: Yes. That would be an explanation of it. See, when I'd be faced with a blank canvas, something like hypnosis takes place. And you see an area. And you catch that area with the paint. And as soon as you put your brush to the canvas, you're committed to the next area, because you've created a shape. And it has to relate to the next area.

[00:11:31.25]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: That's true. Were you ever interested in completely flattening out the—your picture space, or denying any depth?

[00:11:39.71]

RUTH ARMER: No.

[00:11:40.52]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Uh-huh [affirmative].

[00:11:45.08]

RUTH ARMER: I think I would not know how to do that without being just decorative.

[00:11:50.90]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, that's a danger, I think, inherent in—

[00:11:53.51]

RUTH ARMER: So perhaps I avoid it from fear of falling into that slot.

[00:12:00.47]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Because this, of course, is supposed to be one of the concerns of some of the contemporary post-Abstract Expressionists, as far as painters.

[00:12:08.27]

RUTH ARMER: Well, I want to keep the canvas—the surface of the canvas flat. But everything that's in it has to relate to that surface. I don't want any holes in it that you can't get back from.

[00:12:24.86]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: [Laughs.] No deep renaissance space space?

[00:12:28.72]

RUTH ARMER: No. [Laughs.]

[00:12:33.65]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, certainly, the recent works that we—that you showed me last week downstairs would bear witness to the—to your continuing interest in these problems, because you're dealing with forms and with color relationships. But also, there is—you do create a space. The forms exist on pictorial terms—on different planes.

[00:13:05.16]

RUTH ARMER: Yeah. Yeah.

[00:13:10.25]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, unless there's something more—I should have—before we leave the subject of your own work—and I realized we're not really doing it justice. But it's rather hard to talk about without the pictures right here to look at.

[00:13:22.60]

RUTH ARMER: Oh, sure. Very difficult, yes.

[00:13:26.37]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: And I think that you've certainly given some indication of your own concerns, perhaps not a broader personal philosophy of art. But that's always difficult to tackle. I don't know if you want to—

[00:13:45.16]

RUTH ARMER: I don't really do it in words.

[00:13:48.59]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Okay. [Laughs.]

[00:13:48.74]

RUTH ARMER: It's not my medium.

[00:13:49.95]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: I think that's a good answer, and a legitimate one. But I am interested in, before we leave this subject of your own work, asking, once again, about individuals. You've mentioned a couple of experiences that had an impact, that had an influence on you. But what about Clyfford Still and his work, just as an example, or any other individual that you may have encountered personally or, say, in reproduction through the work that perhaps affected you?

[00:14:29.09]

RUTH ARMER: Well, I have no doubt that I've been influenced, as I think almost everybody is, in this day of magazine reproductions of everything. But I don't think I could pick out any particular person. Now, Clyfford Still, undoubtedly, influenced the whole area. I had no personal touch with him at all. I wasn't studying at the time or teaching. And I have never seen, as far as I can really clearly see my own work—I've never seen any influence of that kind in him—in the work.

[00:15:17.45]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: So it certainly wasn't a conscious thing; you said, "a-ha," and then you —

[00:15:20.81]

RUTH ARMER: No, never that. I'm perfectly willing to believe that something happened, though.

[00:15:29.11]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. What do you think, and this is moving now—I think we can leave the question of your own work and its development, and move on to the broader San Francisco situation. What do you think was the nature of Still's influence in the Bay Area, as you observe it?

[00:15:55.85]

RUTH ARMER: Well, the—something had happened at the time that still came that was

important, and that is that we got a lot of very much older students. It was after the war. And they had GI education. So as a more mature group of people, I guess that might have had something to do with his very great influence. He is, according to my taste, a great painter. But great painters, especially silent ones, as he very often is, I'm told, don't always have great influence. But I think he, perhaps, was very much interested in the students, and they in him. I mean, they were not a bunch of high school kids, at all.

[00:16:45.13]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, what do you think of the remark, and I've gotten this from conversations with a couple of artists who were around at the time, the feeling that a student would go to the California School of Fine Arts—it was called then—to learn Abstract Expressionism? In other words, the bill of fare at the Institute was Abstract Expressionism.

[00:17:13.04]

RUTH ARMER: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Yeah.

[00:17:13.55]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: And there's even—I don't know that it was intended this way by those people with whom I was talking—but there's even a feeling of—a sense of the fashionable there. This is "in" now. This is the thing that one does, rather than—and I don't know that anybody can answer this absolutely, but perhaps rather than a sense of real commitment or understanding or philosophical involvement in gestural painting. Do you follow that rather long question?

[00:17:52.25]

RUTH ARMER: Well, there's always—No, it seems to me that in any fashion, there are always a few good people and lots of hangers-on. And this was something where it was fairly easy to be a hanger-on. You could get all kinds of effects very easily and without conviction. And I think a great many Abstract Expressionists were interested only in effects.

[00:18:24.35]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And so it's—there's possibly some truth in that.

[00:18:28.75]

RUTH ARMER: I think that's true. I think in our great big group shows at that period, there was an awful lot of stuff shown that was really just amusing ideas of how to throw paint, or how to hang things on your canvas for no particular reason except that it was different from somebody else's.

[00:18:55.93]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, what do you feel—which artists would you—San Francisco artists, or at least people who were students here at the time—which ones would you cite as more than just casual adopters of an abstract or a gestural manner?

[00:19:19.30]

RUTH ARMER: Oh, David Park and, up to a point, Elmer Bischoff. And oh, another one just as good—I can't think of his name.

[00:19:33.99]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: You haven't mentioned Diebenkorn, of course.

[00:19:36.27]

RUTH ARMER: Oh. [Laughs.] Well, I don't really put him in that school. But he should be, yes. I put him first. But he was never as directly related to Still as the ones that I did mention.

[00:19:56.99]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: So there are really, to your mind, or at least recollection—there are only, which isn't surprising, either, just a few figures that you feel are really strong in the Abstract Expressionist manner?

[00:20:13.13]

RUTH ARMER: Yes, I think so, few that made a real contribution of their own.

[00:20:17.58]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Yeah, of course, outside of New York, which is a different thing.

[00:20:21.53]

RUTH ARMER: Yeah.

[00:20:26.82]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, I think we're already moving in on it; this point #9 on my list. What I'm asking for, basically—your personal observations on Bay Area art, which is a big order, I realize. But I just can't resist the opportunity to ask somebody who's been in a position to—been around for a number of years, been in a position to observe the development and the changes in the San Francisco art world. It's too big a topic to, of course, really go into a great deal of detail about. But I'd certainly be interested to hear anything you have to say about it from the basis of your experience.

[00:21:15.55]

RUTH ARMER: Well, it's hard for me to subdivide it, because the big divisions that I see are from Realism to Abstract Expressionism. I think maybe I'm skipping the Mexican influence, which was very strong at one time, the Rivera period, when he came up here, and not—

[00:21:38.59]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: When was that, in the war years? During the war years? Well, I can look that up.

[00:21:45.69]

RUTH ARMER: Dates—I don't know. But that's easy to find, yeah. That was a strong influence for a short period.

[00:21:54.00]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, actually, that—there was the whole mural—

[00:21:57.36]

RUTH ARMER: Yeah. Well, that was all Rivera.

[00:21:59.28]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: And then the WPA—

[00:22:00.89]

RUTH ARMER: Yeah. Well, that was a little Ashcany, that WPA period.

[00:22:08.10]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: It was a little Ashcany? [Laughs.]

[00:22:09.75]

RUTH ARMER: A little social. And now, which seems to me almost as it—part of it, anyhow, a quite unconscious Dada renaissance.

[00:22:24.27]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Do you think that comes out of the so-called Funk business of the—

[00:22:28.77]

RUTH ARMER: I guess so.

[00:22:29.40]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: —late 50—or '50s, early '60s?

[00:22:31.95]

RUTH ARMER: Yeah. But I—it is really Dada. They just don't know it.

[00:22:40.69]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: What do you feel about—I don't know. I imagine you've paid the attention to the development. And obviously, you're friends with Nell Sinton, who was, I gather, involved, to a certain extent—friendly with Jay DeFeo—

[00:22:57.81]

RUTH ARMER: Oh, yes.

[00:22:58.68]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: —and people like that, Wally Hedrick, these figures that are, to one degree or another, associated with this now famous Bay Area Funk movement, which, interestingly enough, even more than the Abstract Expressionism—

[00:23:13.65]

RUTH ARMER: Well, Wally more than Jay, really.

[00:23:16.65]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. But anyway, perhaps even more than Abstract Expressionism, San Francisco has been put on the map by Funk art. You agree or don't agree?

[00:23:32.28]

RUTH ARMER: [Laughs.] No, I won't. [Laughs.]

[00:23:33.21]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: You won't agree? Okay, that's interesting, too. But it's received—let's put it this way—received a lot of attention and has brought attention to this area.

[00:23:45.94]

RUTH ARMER: Yeah. Yes, I know.

[00:23:46.15]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: How do you feel about that? And why don't you agree with me? [Laughs.] How dare you not agree with me?

[00:23:51.31]

RUTH ARMER: Well, I—because there weren't too many of them doing it. Jay didn't do it, as far as I know, but Wally did. Jay went up her own little alley towards the "White Rose," and, as far as I know, did very little other than that during that whole long period, because Wally started with his beer cans, early. But I don't know. It seemed a back alley to me. It didn't get them anyplace. And it didn't get anybody else anyplace. It was amusing, but dead.

[00:24:39.83]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: So you don't think it was—you don't—you would prefer that San Francisco not be remembered just for Funk artists? [They laugh.]

[00:24:49.91]

RUTH ARMER: Well, it would be a very short memory, I think, because it was a short period. Here, very few people were doing it.

[00:24:57.90]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: I suppose you're right, although, again, I guess I may be an example of the power of the press and of the journals. There are a lot of people out there, elsewhere, who feel that certainly wasn't the only thing going on, but it was—that there were a lot of people involved. And I guess that comes down to a problem of maybe confusing individuality and eccentricity with Funk, whatever Funk is.

[00:25:29.90]

RUTH ARMER: Yeah.

[00:25:30.42]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: But I know one thinks of, say, Bruce Conner stuff.

[00:25:34.01]

RUTH ARMER: Oh, yeah.

[00:25:34.34]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: And one thinks of—well, you mentioned Wally. Of course, he's very, very important. But—see if I can come up with some names—William Morehouse, I guess.

[00:25:47.28]

RUTH ARMER: Well, not much. At least, I don't—

[00:25:50.07]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Of course—yeah, that's true. It's just part of the problem, I suppose, is that a lot of them were brought in on the basis of a few works to Peter Selz's Funk show.

[00:25:59.01]

RUTH ARMER: Yeah. But they didn't stay with it at all.

[00:26:03.66]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, I certainly don't want to beat that topic to death. What about earlier than that, though? Let's get into fairly recent history. What about some of the figures like, oh, Maynard Dixon? You mentioned that you didn't know him.

[00:26:25.47]

RUTH ARMER: Well, he was a great romantic. He—not only in his own person, but in the way he painted the West—the clouds and sunsets and horses. He was a skillful painter.

[00:26:46.15]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: And he was probably one of the big names in the—in this area for quite a while.

[00:26:53.86]

RUTH ARMER: Yeah. And Martinez, Xavier Martinez—but nobody hears of him now. But he was a very sensitive painter of landscape.

[00:27:02.56]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Did you ever know him?

[00:27:04.18]

RUTH ARMER: Yeah. And what's his name, who painted the library murals?

[00:27:16.64]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: The Italian name, you mean?

[00:27:17.84]

RUTH ARMER: Yeah. It'll come to me.

[00:27:22.34]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: I can't think of it, either. Well, was there a group of these people? What are we talking about, the '30s now, or—

[00:27:33.59]

RUTH ARMER: Well, there was a group. I wasn't in it. They were older than I was. And at that time, that makes a big difference, you see. Piazzoni is the name I was trying to think of, who was a very good painter of his kind of painting. Uh, who else? Those were the—probably the important figures of that period. And of course, there were sculptors—Stackpole, Lentelli. The fellow who did all the animals.

[00:28:16.38]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: What about Howard?

[00:28:17.55]

RUTH ARMER: Oh, Bob, yes, and his wife, Adaline Kent. But that's a little later. I'm talking about before that.

[00:28:30.46]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: And so there was a group, though. These people, or at least some of them, got together. And there was a sense of—what I'm getting at—I'm beating around the bush—is looking for a sense of artistic community, or something, in San Francisco.

[00:28:46.77]

RUTH ARMER: Well, I think there was much more then than there seems to be now. I think now, each—on his own more. That also may be an age separation. It may be going on, and I don't know it. But it seems to me that that—what we used to call Bohemia, you know, where they'd get together in restaurants and chew the rag—even at the Art Institute in those days, they used to have Art Association parties. And artists would come. And I think they wouldn't now.

[00:29:27.81]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: [Laughs.] Probably not.

[00:29:28.44]

RUTH ARMER: There's just too much else—

[00:29:30.42]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Too many other things to do?

[00:29:31.86]

RUTH ARMER: Yeah.

[00:29:33.98]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, one other question, or maybe just one other—I don't know. Let's see how it goes. San Francisco, obviously, has matured as an art community, as a community that supports art, and in terms of the number of artists working here. How well they're supporting themselves, I don't know—some more than others. But in this respect, there has been a big change from what would have been viewed, I think, as an insular or provincial situation in terms of art, to something that seems to be expanding, and perhaps connecting in much more with other art centers, and developments elsewhere. Now, I've just created the scenario. What I basically wanted to do was to see if you would agree with that evaluation and how—

[00:30:40.30]

RUTH ARMER: Yeah, with this exception: I do think that San Francisco is less insular than it was. But I think that is partly because New York is less insular than it was.

[00:30:53.50]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:30:53.94]

RUTH ARMER: And the critics no longer feel, without looking, that there's nothing west of the Hudson. They are willing to look. And since they're willing to look, they are able to find something. But there was a period where they just wouldn't look.

[00:31:12.66]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Yeah. Well, there's no question about that. That's been a real problem. But on the other hand, I sometimes get the feeling that there's a choice involved for artists working not just in San Francisco, but on the West Coast or, more to the point, outside of New York City, that there's a choice involved. They choose—they have a choice, either go to New York and work and be a real artist, or to go back home and live a comfortable—and then, perhaps, happier— life in many respects, but run the risk of never being really known, never being successful. I get the feeling that—how to put this exactly—with a number of artists—well, first of all, I posed the dilemma for California artists. And I have a feeling that some of them feel that failure is the automatic result of this choice, they make the choice, and that failure—I don't mean absolute failure, but at least not absolute success—

[00:32:27.20]

RUTH ARMER: Yeah.

[00:32:27.59]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: —comes with the choice. And there's a defensiveness about it, and almost a turning of one's back upon the possibilities of—

[00:32:35.60]

RUTH ARMER: Yeah. That is a bad situation. But to this extent, I think it is still true that you don't have to live in New York. And you don't have to paint in New York. But you do have to show in New York if you want to get commercially on the top during your lifetime. Diebenkorn—the San Francisco Museum never bought a Diebenkorn until he was getting about $6,000 in New York. Of course, he's higher than that now. But they could have bought a Diebenkorn for nothing. He probably would have given them one, happily. And this is still true. If a museum is a pacemaker, as, unfortunately, it is, I think, they always wait until New York has said yes.

[00:33:33.45]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Seal of approval.

[00:33:37.62]

RUTH ARMER: It's less true, perhaps, than it was. But I have yet to see anybody get to real world prominence or eminence, staying in—with the work staying in San Francisco, just working here. They've got to start out with a New York dealer. And then they can live here.

[00:34:06.43]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: But you do feel that the barriers are breaking down—

[00:34:13.00]

RUTH ARMER: Oh, yes.

[00:34:13.84]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: —and that there's a lot more—

[00:34:14.60]

RUTH ARMER: Yes, I think they're being more appreciated than they were.

[00:34:22.86]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: What about the artists in the old days, in the, oh, say, '30s—20s, '30s? As I articulated this dilemma, or this choice, is it something that I fabricated, or is it something that artists even then would consider, to really make it, you would probably be better off in New York, where you could show your work? Was it an issue then?

[00:34:53.04]

RUTH ARMER: Yes, I think it's always been an issue. But I think with the publication of so many art magazines, it's been—it's grown stronger, because you've got to get in the art magazines if you want to get on this stratosphere up here. And that's very hard to do from here. They're not published here. It's so easy in New York to take a camera down the street and get a photograph of something. I think that's still quite a dilemma for the artists here.

[00:35:31.86]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Did artists in the '20s and '30s endeavor to show in New York?

[00:35:39.15]

RUTH ARMER: Yes.

[00:35:39.75]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: It was a goal then, just like it is now?

[00:35:41.43]

RUTH ARMER: Yes, I think that probably was always true. I think the Museum of Modern Art really started that.

[00:35:49.80]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: I see.

[00:35:50.91]

RUTH ARMER: And I think they were real pacemakers. And the only way to get their attention was to exhibit in New York.

[00:36:02.60]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Yeah, that's interesting. That's interesting. So in some ways, there was less a feeling, I gather from—if I'm understanding you correctly—at an earlier time, there was less of a feeling of inferiority than perhaps in very recent years vis-a-vis New York?

[00:36:24.35]

RUTH ARMER: I would think so. This is just a feeling that I have. I can't give you any real examples to prove it.

[00:36:34.58]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, you certainly felt that you could make your way out here.

[00:36:39.14]

RUTH ARMER: Well, never to the top. I've never been at the top of the heap in New York.

[00:36:45.95]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Yeah. But did you feel that—apparently, you just weren't that concerned, and this was—

[00:36:52.95]

RUTH ARMER: Well, I made my choice for various reasons and necessities. But whether I ever could have made the top, who can say? But I certainly didn't make it. And I don't see anybody else making it who doesn't make some great effort to show in New York.

[00:37:13.49]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Yeah. Yeah. Well, I think—

[00:37:15.05]

RUTH ARMER: And of course, now, with the Museum of Modern Art on the downgrade, this may change again. But I—there's no question in my mind that they were the pacemakers for the whole Abstract Expressionist period.

[00:37:30.98]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Yeah, I think that's right. Well, I've sort of run out of—unless you have some more observations, any jewels that you want—

[00:37:40.36]

RUTH ARMER: Well, I think you'll be just fine to turn that off.

[END OF TRACK AAA_armer74_7948_m]

[END OF INTERVIEW.]