Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Leonard Bocour, 1978 June 8

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

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

Transcript

Interview

LB: Leonard Bocour
PC: Paul Cummings

PC: You were born, to start at the beginning, in New York City.

LB: 217 East 98th Street.

PC: In what year?

LB: 1910. I'm 68 years old. I find it difficult to believe [he laughs] but there I am. I was born in New York, have lived in New York all my life, had my business in New York, until very recently when the city forced me off Manhattan Island.

PC: Oh really?

LB: Oh yes. It was a stupid maneuver. The building I was in is still standing, over on West 52nd Street. They converted the area from 50th to 56th and from Tenth to Eleventh Avenue for low-cost housing. And the gossip in the neighborhood was that we had three months, three years. And the little business people, myself included, hired a lawyer to provide us condemnation, but nothing helped. And I wrote letters to Mayor Lindsey telling him that I helped make New York the art capital of the world and I didn't want to -- you know. My suggestion was that they should build a loft building for the business - do a survey and put everybody in a big building. I don't know if you're familiar with that building on 26th Street and Twelfth Avenue -- it's huge -- and I would get form letters back that this money was appropriated for housing, not commercial. It was just silly. Then along came some pigment salesman who told me about this building. So I looked in the Bronx and I looked in Manhattan and the rents were astronomical. This fellow told me about this building in Garnerville. I had never heard of Garnerville. In fact, Garnerville is so small it's not even on the automobile map. It's a tiny little. . . And we're in what I call a premature industrial park. We're in a big, a huge old-fashioned building with wooden beams and all that. And as I said, it was occupied and we finally got it. And I'm sort of happy there, except that [laughing] nobody comes to see me. I used to have visitors. You see, my associations are with the artists in New York.

PC: How did your interest in art begin? Was there interest at home, or --

LB: No, no. Actually, my father was a blacksmith. And years later I said to him, "You know, Papa, somebody should have told you about sculpture." [both laugh heartily] David Smith!

PC: The greatest thing for blacksmiths.

LB: Yes. So, anyway, I was a kid and I was always interested in art. As I look at it now, the big man who really changed my life was Emil Ganso. You know who he is?

PC: Oh yes, sure.

LB: You really know him? Listen, I give lectures, and during the question period some of these kids think Jack Levine has been dead many years, and nobody ever heard of Leon Kroll or Eugene Speicher - you know, the heroes of my youth. Well, anyway, I and my best friend we'd go to art school at the Academy [National Academy of Design] there --

PC: How did you get to all that, though? What was school like? Did you draw, as a child?

LB: Well, I fooled around. It was never anything that you did serious. [laughing] Except my friend and I, we were very much interested in art. In fact we used to go the Metropolitan Museum when I was like, fifteen or sixteen; and in our block, it was a little unheard of, you know. So one day he came and told me about an art school that was for free -- the National Academy, you see -- for nothing -- on 109th Street. So we went up there. We investigated; we had to bring a portfolio and take a test. And then we were accepted, so --

PC: When did you start that?

LB: That was in 1920. . . [he laughs] Oh yoi yoi yoi yoi [laughing again]. Oh God, 1927, '26, '27.

PC: So you were a teenager, really.

LB: Yes! Of course. My mother was outraged when she discovered what I'd done. I said, "Don't worry, Mama."

[PC laughs] Whoever heard of an artist . . .? "No, I'm going to be a commercial artist and they make a lot of money." Now, he met a girl -

PC: Who was this fellow?

LB: Irwin Lefcourt. Irwin Lefcourt and I went to P.S. 10 together. The other night, Tuesday night, he celebrated his 50th wedding anniversary. This gal that he married -- still married to her -- it's so funny, we were kids. He met this girl and he was an art student. And she said, "Oh, my cousin Fanny, she's married to a very famous artists. How would you like to meet him?" See, that was the big come-on. The idea was, she didn't want to lose contact with this handsome young fellow. [he laughs] So he said, "Sure, I'd love to meet him."

PC: Who was the artist?

LB: Emil Ganso.

PC: Oh, I see.

LB: He got chicken. He came to me and said, "Hey, I don't want to go alone. Come on." [both laugh] So, we go to meet the great man. And I want to tell you that it was very exciting. He had a studio, you know, a walkup on Sixth Avenue with the slums, the elevator was still up. And we were reel bobbysoxers -- everything was wonderful during that time. It was the greatest -- I tell you, if I may quote myself, I was more excited about meeting him. Because he was, like, the first artist I'd met outside of school -- you know, teachers you don't consider "artists." He had a scrapbook, he'd had exhibitions. He had quite an early career with Wyeth --Wyeth and Boy's Life. So, I remember that he said, "Come back. Come back." So we came. Got friendly with him, Fanny and Sarah -- that was her cousin -- so we were good friends. I sort of hung around. Oh, this was for years. We used to sweep the studio, and stretch -- he used to make his own canvases. And I will say this for Ganso, for good old Emil: He was a real German technician. Also German in many ways -- he was very sentimental, and very mean. God, he could --

PC: Why do those things go together?

LB: I don't know. He was something. And he had studied at the Institute [Art Institute of Chicago] and he had the book [Way Beyond Art by Alexander D`rner] -- in German before it was even translated. The guy in California translated it in 1936. Anyway, now comes the big upheaval. I was always to the League [Art Students League] at night --

PC: How did you get to the League?

LB: Oh anybody could go to the League --

PC: You went to the Academy for a while?

LB: Yes, I was all finished, you know.

PC: How long did that last?

LB: Oh, about three years.

PC: Did you study with anybody interesting?

LB: Homer B. [???Don't know who he is. Possibly Homer Bair???]

PC: Oh really?

LB: Who the hell was the other -- there were a few other guys there, whose names escape me. [pauses to try to remember] Homer B., of course, was a sweet old guy.

PC: What was he like as a teacher?

LB: Nice. Very -- seemed kind of ancient to a kid you know -- he was probably only 50 years old.

PC: But, now, you hadn't had art classes in high school, had you?

LB: Yes, oh sure, sure. As a matter of fact I met a girl whose father was our teacher, at DeWitt Clinton High School.

PC: Who was that?

LB: Man by the name of Bulukrantz [sp.]. She does sculpture now. She's married to a guy named Kostoi [sp.] who used to teach at Music and Art. So anyway, to come to this great moment -- this is 1932. And I was working at an advertising agency, not doing anything that had to do with art; it had to do with checking. A 'checker' in an advertising agency gets the newspapers, checks, puts a crayon around the edge -- he has a pay job --and then he puts it in a book. It's very, very monotonous stupid work --

PC: Cut and paste.

LB: Yes, you know, it was an easy job. And I got fired. I got fired; so, you know, it was very -- you know, the Depression; in those days it was really depressing; the future looked very bleak. There was no unemployment insurance, none of the social services. I went to see my spiritual leader, Emil Ganso. And Emil, I dare say was very sympathetic at that time. What do you do? And it was he who suggested that I make paint for artists. And nobody went into a surer thing because, he said, [LB laughs] "If you don't sell it, we can always use it!" [both laugh heartily] So that was the beginning. And Irwin and I -- this guy Irwin Lefcourt -- we started the business together. He dropped out quite a few years later to become the Assistant Print Curator of the Smithsonian. Now he runs a gallery up in Larchmont. He's quite a guy.

PC: We're jumping ahead rather quickly here. What was the Academy like, in those days?

LB: Oh, it was a nice art school.

PC: Would you draw from casts? And figure --

LB: Yes, we did all that -- You know, you went every day. It wasn't too --

PC: Why did you switch to the League?

LB: Because the League, in those days, this was the big, big thing. See, in those days the League was a very large big place. It was really free, and you could go -- Reginald Marsh was there, [Yasuo] Kuniyoshi was there. There was a whole gang there.

PC: How did you find out about them? Through Ganso, or --

LB: Around those guys. The first artists I had met was Emil Ganso. Then I remember meeting Raphael Soyer. This was before starting our business -- And I remember being very much impressed -- I'll never forget it [he laughs] because Rahpael said, "Easel paining is dead!" [both laugh]

PC: In the 1930s?

LB: Oh, easily. And I remember how impressed I was, because Art Digest and he had a reproduction in it. Boy oh boy. And also, there was another guy. It was Georgy Brodsky [George Brodsky (should this clarification be here???)]. Oh Christ Almighty. [both laugh] But he was also going to be -- he was living with some gal -- Georgy was going to be the next Cézanne. I don't know what the hell, he's not painting any more. You know, it was a period you're interested and --

PC: Try everything, look around.

LB: Yeah, you look around.

PC: But who did you study with at the League?

LB: Oh, I studied with a bunch of guys at the League. There was Reginald Marsh. The Marsh class, that was the big thing. Kuniyoshi was there. I didn't last too long at the League. The League was very cheap, I think it was about $14 or $16 a month; and you'd go, you know -- Well anyway, the biggest thing was we go to see Ganso. And he said to me, "Why don't you make paint for artists?" So that was the start of it --

PC: Why was he into it -- there were --

LB: Oh yes, I left out the most important part. So we got friendly with him. We were very pleased to meet the great artist, you know. [he begins to laugh] And there was Prohibition in those days. And he had a studio -- he moved from Sixth Avenue to 74th Street -- 54 West 74th Street; there's a studio building. Very few facilities in that building, quite a few guys in that building now. And [laughs again] around the corner, on Columbus Avenue, there was a delicatessen that sold whisky -- gallons of whiskey -- for $4 a gallon; I'll never forget. And he -- one thing about Emil: he constantly drank and smoked. He and Morris Louis were chain smokers. So he used to fill up a water glass full of whiskey. I was just a kid, eighteen or so. So it would make me sick, on the way home I'd die. He was unbelievable.

PC: That was sort of bathtub liquor, wasn't it.

LB: Yeah, it was terrible stuff. So, anyway, we rented this place, it was down on -- 2 West 15th Street. It was like a large closet. You could touch both walls. There was one window. The reason we rented that room: there was a big rolltop desk. We took the rolltop off and threw that away and used the desk as a grinding table. Gee, I should have brought you some pictures -- maybe you can come up to -- I have some old photographs. And that was Bocour Hand-ground Colors. I was in that building for at least twelve or fourteen years. I was told that in that building, the top floor was full of skylight studios. One of the most famous artists at that time was William Zorach, he had a studio on the corner there. Jo Jones had a studio --

PC: I've seen photographs of him in that studio. Who else was there?

LB: Oh, Joe de Martini [Joseph de Martini] was there. Now there's a guy -- you think of de Martini -- God, he was so famous, and popular. Joe's about 80-something; 87, maybe; I don't know. I have a few of his paintings. I love his work. A seascape, up there. Well, anyway, we started to --

PC: Why did he say make artists; colors? Were they hard to buy?

LB: No! It was just something to do. Oh yeah he had -- I forgot to mention. . . When we got friendly with him, we noticed in the corner of the studio there was a little kitchen table with a glass top and a motor. And he used to make his own oil paint. Pretty soon I was making it. It never occurred to me that a professional artist would go and buy his own tubes of paint. He used to say, "I wouldn't use that shit --" [both laugh]There used to be a firm still in existence, named [?] & Spearles [I couldn't find these company names].

PC: Oh yes.

LB: For dry color. And it's like a big retail he said, "I went there in the beginning to buy powdered yellow ochre." Sounds real but when you buy in quantity these days it's just sort of like a jobber. So anyway, it was he who suggested it was something to do; there was no other job. So we did it, and I went peddling the paint from studio to studio. That's how I had to meet all these guys --

PC: Oh, and one artist would pass you on to another --

LB: Yeah. Like Leon Kroll was at the Academy. So I called on him. He bought my first --

PC: What colors did you make?

LB: We made a palette of about eighteen colors. We had a little hand-printed label. Somebody sent me a tube recently. I have it wrapped in cotton. An old, old thing, I think it's at least -- see, actually my whole life I've only had this one job; that was the only job I ever -- then I went into business and have been an entrepreneur all my life [he laughs]. So that was the shop. First, I think, it measured six feet by eighteen; and with a little window. The biggest studio I had there -- this is how I figured out the square feet, and actually measured 22 feet by 27. And we had to move because it was getting small. So I went to see a real estate man and he said, "How many square feet do you need?" And I really don't know. I said, "How do you get square feet?" So he told me. [both laugh] So we moved up to 16th Street. And that building is -- I consider it the spiritual home of Bocour Colors. Because now there's a luxury-type apartment there. We had a very - you see, actually it was a kind of a crazy part of my life. In a sense, it wasn't a business, and I wasn't an artist, as a way of life. And no money -- God Almighty, you'd make $12 or $15 -- The guys on the Project, the WPA [Works Project Administration] started, see, and that was a very interesting experience -- they were getting $23.86 a week. I was making maybe $12 a week. Then I got involved for a short period with the Treasury Relief Art Project. That was the project for the public buildings -- the murals and all that. But that was a short-lived thing.

PC: What was that about? I mean, what did you have to do with it?

LB: We made paint for them and certain colors that they specified to make pictures. And here was the idea: the Project, the WPA, the Federal Art Project, to get on that was quite a problem. You really had to be broke --

PC: Oh, the poverty --

LB: Yes. So you went and applied for -- in those days they called it Home Relief. Now, if you had a brother that was working, or a father somewheres, you were not eligible. You had to really be broke. Then you got on there; well, what do you do? I'm an artist; so OK. If you were a tailor or a carpenter or a bricklayer, a mason, you were assigned to different projects. The Art Project was divided into two parts. One was the easel project, the murals, and the other was a teaching project. So the murals, that was TRAP [Treasury Relief Art Project]. That you didn't have to be on relief, that you just had to submit a sketch. They would hold one big competition -- I'll never forget: the big one was the St. Louis Post Office. Everyone submitted. I remember Eddie Noman [sp] and Nick

Siporen [sp] won it; it was $50,000. Now, based on the sketches that you submitted, they would give you a job. I remember Sol Wilson got the Westhampton Beach Post Office -- most miserable painting you ever saw in your life. [both laugh] So you handed out commissions with blueprints, and they paid you one-third down when they accepted your sketch, one-third when it was half-finished and one-third when it was installed -- you had to install it. So that was what I call the 'golden era of American art.' And that period, everybody now I'd say over the age of 55 or 60 -- it used to be over the age of 40 -- like you know I'm talking about that period: it was, like, '36, '46 --

PC: Forty years ago.

LB: It was 40 years ago. De Kooning [Willem de Kooning] who was a lad of 28 or so. And all of these guys, all -- my speculation about this is that they all learned to paint and nothing came out of the project. That was the whole era of Social Realism -- the cops beating the pickets and the breadlines --

PC: Sorrowful mothers. . .

LB: Yes, yes. The only guy that really did some justice to that was Reginald Marsh. He really did the down-and-outers and all that with some kind of sensitivity. But for the most part it was all crap and they just had a show at the Parsons School [Parsons School of Design] --

PC: Did they think at the time, though, that it was so terrible?

LB: No. At the time they though it was great. That was real art. Oh yes. [he laughs]

PC: That's the thing that's always intrigued me, because so many artists of that period that I've talked to say, "We-e-ell, you know, we were --" [making vague wordless noises in imitation] "squeezing around doing this and that --"

LB: Yes, well sure.

PC: -- being ambiguous about it.

LB: It was kind of an interesting situation in the sense that for the most part, the popular school was the social realism, of course. The big guys that really got to be important were Thomas [Hart] Benton, John Steuart Curry and Grant Wood.

PC: That was sort of at the end of the 30s.

LB: No, it's what I call "the hillbilly art.: They were the big Regionalists.

PC: Thomas Craven.

LB: Yes. Oh, he was their big mouthpiece. But the fellow, like, for example, there was the -- we all were, you know, very Left Wing. There was another great -- what was her name, Miss McMahon who was the head of the Project --

PC: Audrey McMahon.

LB: Yes, she was head of the Project then. When I see these kids, you know, demonstrating on the campus that's nothing -- we were [he laughs heartily] for demonstrating -- See, every year Congress had to appropriate money for the Project. They were handing out pink slips and so forth.

PC: The Artists Union did all that --

LB: You can't get three artists to agree. Like, I like your work, I like my work, we think he stinks, he thinks everybody --

PC: We all agree to seek good money from the government. [both laugh]

LB: But economically, the 2386 -- oh, those meetings! I'll never forget. There was one big issue: Why do we have to get in line to sign for checks? Why can't they mail us the checks? I remember Ganso wouldn't go stand in line, I used to go stand in line for him, sight his name and take the check. [both laugh]

PC: What was the objection? They just didn't want to do it?

LB: They didn't think it was logical to stand in line at 10 in the morning; why can't they just mail us the checks. The Artists' Union would have dances. And then there were big demonstrations, sit-ins.

PC: Were you involved with any of those artists unions?

LB: Oh sure, sure.

PC: Working around at everything!

LB: I was not on the Project but I would go to the meetings and go to their dances. These were all my friends. . .

PC: I'm interested in going back to the business, now. How did you make up your first palette? Which colors -- did Ganso say --

LB: Oh well, we made a list. We said, "You need yellow ochre, you need viridian, you need burnt sienna, you need burnt umber, you need cadmium yellow," you know. We made about 18 colors. And the tubes come in this little nested box. I remember getting a cardboard valise from Woolworth's for 98 cents and carrying it around. You called on the artists.

PC: What did they say? They didn't know you particularly --

LB: They didn't know me -- paint out on the palette and show them. The paint was pretty good, you know. It was interesting. And I think also there was a kind of romantic idea, this artist thing -- the paint for artists. Maybe that was -- I don't know what it was. And certainly there was no money for it. I enjoyed the life. It wasn't until after the War that I decided -- you see [he laughs]

PC: I mean, from the 30s to the 40s -- that's 10 years.

LB: You know, it's very difficult to kind of make up your mind about something. Like, I toyed with the idea of giving up this whole stupid business. Now, either you're in business or you're kidding yourself.

PC: Right, You're either in business or out of it.

LB: Yes. So I decided one day -- because that guy that I'd gone to school with became a drunk, neurotic, crazy. At lease I had a sort of home base at 2 West 15th Street. And, by the way, that was a big hangout, you know. When I think of all the guys that came. . .

PC: Would artists start coming to see you then?

LB: Oh sure. It was a big, oh yes. Did you see the Whitney [Whitney Museum of American Art] show? Did you see what Alec Brook had there, that piece of shit? [both laugh] The worst thing about going to the Whitney -- it was on Eighth Street in those days -- is to meet an artist, and to walk around with him. We/He[?] would spit on every canvas, you know.

PC: Right.

LB: The great thing about it -- Mrs. Force [Juliana Force], she was head of the museum, and she loved Wood's [Grant Wood] stuff. Oh boy, everybody was -- see, in those days, they bought paintings out of the show.

PC: Right.

LB: And now, I don't know -- I was told in those days that Mrs. Wood may have left a fund --

PC: No, she was advised, whatever, whenever.

LB: Maybe this is just a romance and that they would buy out of the show $50,000 worth of paintings. Well, I had heard also, before the Whitney Museum, and again this might be a romance, that she had the Whitney Studio Club, she had the studio upstairs --

PC: Right, right.

LB: And everybody -- I remember Ganso had a show there. And she would buy, like, $2,000 or $3,000 worth of paintings. And that was enough, because somebody would say in my ear that "Ganso wants to go to Paris for a year."

PC: Stuart Davis

LB: Yes, she bought all of these fellows. Now, she had all these paintings and she wanted to give them to the Metropolitan [Metropolitan Museum of Art]. So she and Mrs. Force went up to the Metropolitan to talk to the curator of American art. The story goes that he took her down to the basement and said, "Look at all this garbage, we've got our own, why do we need yours?" [PC laughs] And he turned down the whole thing.

PC: Did you know Juliana Force?

LB: I didn't know her.

PC: Enough to say "hello."

LB: Yes. At Woodstock -- I spent time at Woodstock --

PC: When did you start going up there?

LB: Oh, 1932, '33, '34. As a matter of fact, the last time -- Ganso died in 1944, and it wasn't until after the War that I went back. But the great thing about it was -- a kid, Elsie Speicher -- Gene [he explodes in laughter]. I'll never forget the first time -- I was in the studio with Ganso, and in came -- I'd heard of Gene Speicher, Gene Speicher, Gene Speicher. He was a big, big name, he was the king of Woodstock. And he came in, he'd come off the golf course, smoking a big cigar. Jesus Christ, this was shattering, you know! What kind of guy -- you know; how could he be -- and he was a big guy, you know --

PC: Oh, was he?

LB: Yes, he was very tall. Quite an athlete. They tell a story that he and Bellows [George Bellows] used to meet at the 23rd Street "Y" and play basketball. And neither one would tell the other that they were painters. It finally came, [both laugh] so, anyway, he invited us to dinner --

PC: He was a big art-world politician too, wasn't he?

LB: Yes, well, I mean I was just a -- but they used to come and play poker. I think they had Tuesday and Thursday night poker games. Konrad Cramer, Henry Mattson, Speicher, Kuniyoshi. And they would talk, I would just hang around, I was just young, not "in" with these big giants. And I would hear them talk about how still lifes were not so -- oh, nudes: you can't sell a nude -- you know -- [he makes sounds imitating a hum of talk] of course. The "of course" [both laugh]. They're real pro's, you know. But it was kind of an interesting experience. At Woodstock nobody bothered you until five o'clock. Then somebody would come, Mrs. Something -- of course, if you had a car in those days it meant you were rich, somebody would come drive up and the idea was to show them the paintings or watercolors. And if they bought something, then you'd pass them to your friends. If they didn't buy anything, -- "cheapskate," you know --

PC: Scratch them off!

LB: That was the big thing. Of course Ganso had a very kind of unique position in a sense. He was, like, the leading theoretician, the leading technical person. People would come with their problems and all that.

PC: Why? Because of the D`rner book and his background?

LB: Yes. I went back after the War and there was a whole new gang up there -- Eddie Newman [Edward R. Newman] and Bruce Curry. Guston [Phillip Guston] of course moved to Woodstock. He became kind of like the kingpin of Woodstock.

PC: When you said "mixing color," did you just learn this from Ganso, or did you use the D`rner book, or -- ?

LB: Yes, we used the D`rner book, and then Ganso would always refer to -- he'd never call it a formula, he always called it a "r-r-recipe." "You got to have a fine r-r-recipe." D`rner had suggested -- you see, there are certain people said what they call "low oil absorption," "high oil absorption," you know. I never studied chemistry, done through trial and error. And then there was a very, very interesting In the beginning I had all these famous artists -- you get, you know, there are thousands of unknown artists, like Leon Kroll, and Speicher, and how in the hell -- I remember, I used to love to get sweet old Ernest Lawson. Oh God, he was always good for a -- Wayland Adams: does that name ring a bell? He was a portrait painter. But Lawson, he was an alcoholic. He had a studio in those days at the National Arts Club. And I would go to see him there. And he would take this little painting in maybe this 15- or 20-inch space and give it to me, and say, "I'd like you to have this." He was drunk. He had this sofa and he had a bottle on the sofa. And he offered me a drink. "Oh no, no --" And he'd take a swallow of it. You know, I felt like such a jerk -- "Oh no, Mister -- You know, it's like rolling a drunk. I figured he didn't know what the hell he was doing. I couldn't take the painting. I dare say now -- [both laugh] I had this regret, because he always offered me this little painting. "Oh, I want you to have it, I've been working on it since 1920." He was a very sweet guy. And he died mysteriously, though. Nobody knows whether he committed suicide, or fell off a dock in Florida, and so forth. He told me something -- this is a little know fact, you know -- he was part of The Eight.

PC: Right.

LB: And The Eight only had one exhibition, as you know.

PC: Right.

LB: And he chortled about it and said it was so funny. He said, "You know, most artists never have a nice thing to say about anybody else's work. We had this show and everybody spoke about of everybody else's work with high praise. 'Oh, go see this Sloan [John Sloan],' 'go see the -' Everybody had high praise to say of everybody else. That damn show," he said, "made history, we never dared repeat it."

PC: True. Well, it sort of launched them in a way.

LB: Yes. But you go to a, you meet some guys who say, "Gee whiz, he used to be good" or "Geez, that was a disappointing show, wasn't it." It isn't all his own fault. I mean, I find myself in a very, you know -- we'd go to the Whitney Museum, God it would be terrible to walk with an artist.

PC: Oh, any museum -- [both laugh]

LB: Yes, that's right -- the words of wisdom.

PC: Well, now, how did the business develop in the Depression?

LB: It was a person-to-person thing.

PC: But you started selling to shops?

LB: No, that came later. But what happened was, there was a celebrated art shop on 28th Street, J./Jay [?]Rabinowitz. And J. Rabinowitz died many years ago and his children took over. There were two dealers in town that called me. This guy -- he's now dead too, Leo Robinson; and he called me up and wanted to buy my paint. He said to me "You give me the same deal that Windsor-Newton gives me." I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "Well, they give us 40 off the list price." I said, "It seems to me that this is ridiculous, I'm giving it away; no, I could never do that." I went back -- I'm not [he laughs] a very, very organized businessman, but I went back and started doing some calculation. I said, "Geez, 40 off, that would be pretty good." Oh, and he said he'd give me like a $100 order. I rolled my eyes and went back to him and I said, "Okay." And he bought the $100 order, and he owed me, like, $60. I thought to myself, "My God, if I could get like five stores, $500 a month. . ."

PC: Wow!

LB: I'd be rich for life, you know? So at that time, Rosenthal -- that was a shop on Eighth Street, Robert Rosenthal -- and he had called me. I went to see him, and the same thing -- 40% off. That sort of gave me an idea -- instead of hiding around to see the -- see, that was another great thing: you'd call on a lot of these artists -

PC: Took forever.

LB: Yes. I recently ran into Sally Avery. I remember calling on Milton [Avery], years ago. So we've been having a bit of a giggle about it. And [he laughs] she said that Milton always felt sorry for me, he bought a goddamn tube of yellow ochre, it lasted him seven years! [both laugh] The way he used paint! So, I thought this is interesting, if I could -- so I went to the dealers. And by the time I didn't realize -- see, a lot of the artists -- see, I did have paint, I still did have paint. But they'd go to the store to buy canvas and brushes and they'd get talking. And I'd go up to Bocour and get the stuff there --

PC: Pretty soon the store wanted enough of Bocour --

LB: [laughing] The idea was, it sounded much bigger than I was, you know. It was after the War that I decided that I should either become a businessman, or -- it was a crazy kind of . . . as I say, it was a way of life. I was not getting any younger, I wanted to get married.

PC: What did you do in the War years?

LB: I was the healthiest 4F in America. What had happened -- that was another silly thing. I never, ever thought for a second I would not get drafted. In fact, I was called up very early, and I had prepared to put all the tables and I was selling all the paint and giving it all away, and I expected to go in the Army. I don't know if you remember "Lucky Strike Green has gone to war." I took out a little ad that said "Bocour Colors has gone to war." So I went up for my examination, the War broke in December '41 and in February '42 I was called. It never occurred to me -- even now, I play tennis with kids half my age, I can beat them and all that stuff; I swim, and I run. And so [laughing heartily] I get called up, and I was all prepared to go. And I get examined and no trouble until I come to the neuro-psychiatrist. They ask you these questions, like "Do you like boys?" "No!" "Do you like girls?" "Yes." "Do you like baseball?" "Yes." Then they hit you -- the reflex. I sit on a chair, and this left leg, this ankle, what they call the Achilles jerk, doesn't respond. So he said to me, "Did you ever have a back injury?" I

said, "Yeah, oh yeah, sure I did." The year before -- this will upset you [hardly able to speak from laughing] -- I was struck by lightning.

PC: Oh really?

LB: Struck by lightning and practically given up for dead. It was in Gallup, New Mexico.

PC: What were you doing there?

LB: I was visiting California. See, in those days you'd take the summer off. Folks would put a sign on the wall, "Will be back after Labor Day." But anyways I was visiting some artists and on the way back to New York -- we were seven miles east of Gallup and they had the Indian ceremonial at the time. I was anxious to see it. So I visited -- it was over Sunday evening and I followed their map and I found them. They were very happy to see me and they were camping on this Indian reservation. Do you know what a hogan is? [PC replies that he does]. Very few Easterners know. They had two tents that they used as dressing rooms and they used the hogans for a kitchen. The weather in New Mexico is most mercurial. Oh yes, it's the little things that save your life. I got there, and they said, "Oh, Lenny you've got to pose for us." So I went in and put on a pair of shorts -- I still have the shorts, I'll show it to you -- a pair of shorts and a pair of sneakers. I was taking poses and I was kidding with them, you know. "I'm not a museum character, I'm a New York Jewish boy." I wanted to see if they would say, "Put your arm up," and I was having a lot of fun. Then it came time for lunch. You know, at a camp everybody has to be socially useful. I said I would make the fire. So I got the wood. Th hogan is shaped like a deep flue and has this smokehole, and I'm six feel tall. Now, as I'm trying to get this fire going, and I get it going, it begins to rain. Oh, it pours and there's thunder and lightning. I get this brilliant idea -- now mind you, there are three other people in that hogan with me and nobody stopped me. I had this brilliant idea, and I run out to the car, I take this umbrella because of the rain and the wind and everything I didn't even have a chance to put up the umbrella; if I had I'd have been killed right then and there. In that storm, 12 sheep and two horses were killed. I get into the hogan and I stand on a little wooded box and I put the umbrella through the hole. [claps his hands loudly] The next day I woke up. It's hours later. Fortunately this man that I was visiting was a good Boy Scout, he knew how to treat. And there was a man standing over me. They'd got a doctor, went to the hospital, and I came to. I could feel this arm -- you know you treat a lightning-struck person same as a drowned person. I could feel this arm, up here, and I could hear his voice down at the deep end of a tunnel. He would say to me, "Leonard, you're all right, you were struck by lightning but you're all right." And I would answer and said all kinds of crazy things which he didn't remember, you know. Then the man standing over me said, "All right, roll him over on that blanket and we'll take him to the hospital." And I said, "A hospital bed --" "Man you want to get pneumonia and die??" The way he said it, you know -- such emphasis. I didn't want to get pneumonia, I didn't want to die. So they sent me to St. Mary's Hospital, I was in the hospital for a week. I suffered from shock, which I though was always something when you put your finger on a raw electric wire. There was a woman in Gallup who was quite an art patron. She has the world's worst collection [laughing]

PC: Who was that?

LB: Her name was Mrs. Seemone [sp]. She must be dead now, these many, many years, because she was quite elderly while I was there. She knew these friends of mine, and she sent word through them that if I wanted to convalesce, she had a room in the house. But I was just in the hospital for a week, so I just said that I might as well go as just sit around. She had the most marvelous collection of Indian blankets. And in those days -- this was 1940 -- she told me that Fred Harvey had offered her $50,000 for her collection. And she had a bunch of paintings -- everybody that came through the Southwest stayed with her. So miserable a collection, but she was a very sweet old gal. And she had a son and daughter that ran away from home. And when she got friendly she would cry to me that "My son is pumping gas." And she had a real ranch house, by the way. She had this Indian manservant who waited on me. She was very nice. Her father was the one that started the Indian ceremonials. I understand now it's gotten quite ceremonial --

PC: Oh yes.

LB: In fact, I haven't been back to Gallup -- I went back once, the following year, just drove past it, the lightning and thunder. But anyway, this back of mine -- in those days, because I was called up early, in 1-B, which was limited services, and I was a little baffled: I'd heard of 4-F and 1-A, but never 1-B. In those days the first inductions were at Governors Island. So I asked a soldier, "What about this 1-B?" and he said, "Go home, they'll call you." Then it was about six months later, eight months later, I was recalled. I think I must have held up the war effort for, like, three hours -- they had every damn doctor (by now they'd moved to Grand Central Palace). And I would say to the doctor, "You know, Doc, I don't know what this is all about, I feel fine." And I really wanted to get in the Army. All my friends were in the Army, and I was hoping they'd send me to Japan or the Pacific or to Europe because it was the Nazis they were our big enemies. So I was put in 4-F. I cried for a week, I couldn't understand it. And it was this -- I then went to the neurologist and it was iculitis, and he said it could have been I was born with it, it could have been the lightning. But I do have a back problem. Like right now, I'm having some

difficulty with my back. Maybe it's the weather or what. But because my place became a kind of USO for artists .... The guys would come -- this was the funny thing -- the guys would come with their dufflebags and ... lunchtime he'd say, "I'll be back at four o'clock." Four days later they'd show up [laughs]. The phone calls. . . [laughing again] It was a real USO for -- I'll never forget, this one guy was down at Ft. Bragg and he said, "Gee, I'm doing a portrait of the Colonel" or something, and "Gee if it doesn't turn out right I'll get shipped overseas. If it does turn out, I'll be able to paint the whole staff." But the war years, it was kind of interesting, in a sense that there was --

PC: It was fine for business in those years, really.

LB: Business was all right, yes. It was after the war years that I decided that the hand-grinding was --

PC: You were still doing all of this by hand?

LB: Oh yes --

PC: Oh really?

LB: Oh sure, it was all hand-ground until 1952.

PC: Did you have many people working for you by that time?

LB: No! [laughs]

PC: It was still a sort of kitchen operation?

LB: Yes. I remember right after the War there was this colored girl, black woman, worked right next door. She said, "My brother's coming out of the Army, can you give him a job?" I said, "Yeah, I'd love to give him a job." So he came, and he's still with me. So we ground -- then we decided it was time to make paints. And I had a few friends who'd gotten jobs at teachers. They said, "Why don't you make color like Grumbacher does?" They pre-tested, because they're very cheap. In those days they had, like, three series. They were 25 cents, 35 cents, and 50 cents; cadmium and things [on transcript]. I didn't know anything about machinery, in fact I borrowed from a little lady who was to become my first wife, the mother of my child, about $750. I think I married her so I wouldn't have to pay her back. [PC laughs loudly] I bought a mill, which was absolutely worthless, the guy really rooked me. So I finally had another mill, and we would ground the thing and --

PC: How did you maintain your levels beforehand, when you were doing it by hand? Just by measuring and weighing?

LB: Oh yes. You weighed off so much oil, so much pigment, then you'd splash it around. In fact, I turned up some old photographs recently. I had them copied -- they wanted to put it in a show at a convention of the trade association. You know, I swear to God, when I think about it, the business -- [hesitates, groping for words] now, you know, that so-and-so's so dumb he's got a million dollars and . . . So I decided to become a businessman. And be, like, a wholesaler of paints. I still had to connect with the artists, and run the shop. It was a nice life. And you know, the business of dealing with artists --artists are very honest. They pay you if they have the money; if they don't pay you it's because they don't have the money. I used to have people, really -- I'll never forget a gal wrote me, "I think I owe you $35." Like, five years ago I remember some guy coming to see me once. He said, "I owe you $40." I had no recollection of him or the money. A lot of people, you know, they come into some money -- she said, "I came into an inheritance" and she sent me check.

PC: Paying off her debts.

LB: Yes. So I really [he laughs] -- like, this is a historic fact: See, I went into business in 1932, just as I've described to you. Since that time, no new color company has been established. Windsor-Newton was 1802, Weber [sp][*I was not able to verify the names of these companies] was 1875, and Grumbacher's 1890; Shiva [sp] was 1928. Now, all them are before me, they're all there before me. Now, over this period of time, a 45-year period, many companies have brought in colors. As a matter of fact, you never heard of Newman's, which is Rowney's [sp] they came in --

PC: Old English company, yes.

LB: And, like, right now there's Lafont-Bourgeois [sp].

PC: In France.

LB: And there's Payard [sp], that's right. But colors that have been brought in, like Dusselforf Colors, Watteau, Courbet, Fragonard which is sold in Quebec, Canda, cannot be sold here --

PC: Really? Why?

LB: The color is a bitch. Like one of the biggest flops was a color called Becker's Aids [sp], which was brought in from Sweden with the endorsement of the King of Sweden; and -Roche [sp] which was a big big operation brought it in and they tried to peddle it. And one of the most recent fiascoes is this Hunt Manufacture , they put out a color called which was a big fiasco.

PC: Why didn't it "take," do you think?

LB: It didn't take for a number of reasons; I think, one, that they didn't have a product. And then they change it, called it all in, gave it a viking funeral and came out with Vanguard [?]. That didn't take. Now they came out with a new one called Speedball, they own that, Speedball. Anyway, to establish a color is a terribly, terribly difficult thing. And the only reason that I got established was -- first of all, there was no business, there was no money, nobody but a lunatic would have stuck with it. And when I started to make it a business --

PC: What did you live on during all those years in the 30s?

LB: [laughs] You live! You know, I look back, and survival -- the most important thing is survival. Like, my kid wants to be an artist. This is his painting, by the way. So, I tell him -- you know, when he told me he was really serious about becoming a painter, I said, "Well, here's what you have to do. You have to go get a passport, you have to go get a union card." So what's a passport? MFA. You get the MFA and you get a teaching job. Everybody has done this. Because it's going to be a hell of a time before you live off the sale of your paintings. And teaching is the big subsidy, that is the big subsidy.

PC: Right. That's dropping out now, though.

LB: Well, there are no jobs.

PC: There's still this big backlog.

LB: There are no jobs, that's the hell of it. The guys that are working, you know, that's how they live.

PC: Right.

LB: And that's why painting has become so expensive. In the good old days, if you were paid 50 bucks for a painting, that was eating money. Nowadays, they're getting $17,000, $22,000, so you know, they get married.

PC: They have a car to keep up.

LB: Yeah, you know, so they put a fancy price, more or less for an ego-trip.

PC: I remember - every time one of the big guy's prices would go up, all the other guys would push their prices up too.

LB: Sure. Well, I'll never forget this friend of mine told me he was going to have a show and there was this painting for $4,000. I said, "Joe, meaning no disrespect, who the f--- is going to give you $4,000??" He got so angry. [PC laughs loudly] He said, "What the hell are you talking about? Bill De Kooning gets $17,000 a painting much smaller." I say, "What am I doing, what am I saying."

PC: What are you doing?

LB: You know, I really don't know. . .about survival and all that sort of thing. You begin to make some money, you begin to do some things. You know, the idea was to build a business and to make a better mousetrap. And you see, we had in this industry two giants: [inaudable]Pigments and Grumbacher. They're the two big ones. Well, there's Windsor-Newton, and somewhere in third of fourth place is me. And you know, when I think. . . Grumbacher was recently acquired by Time-Mirror.

PC: Oh really?

LB: Yes. The gossip goes that they gross $30 million and that Time-Mirror paid them $15 million. And I know that Biney & Smith owns [?] Pigments. And they're big, you know -- big advertising, big staff, and all that. And I have my own little self, mainly, and a couple of guys that "rep" me. And survival [he laughs heartily] I look back, and I swear to God I don't know how the hell -- there's no money in this thing. And I've always lived in joints and things like that. [laughs again] I remember, there would always be -- one thing about artists I would say, they're a little better resourceful. I remember there was a gang I used to hang around with. And you go to somebody's -- everybody would chip in a quarter, so you'd go buy some spaghetti and meatballs, some wine. . .

PC: That's the way to do it.

LB: Yeah. There was always something. [he laughs] That's why I've always been, you know, "la vie de bohème" [he pronounces it bohaim] and all that baloney. I don't believe in suffering, I think all that kind of crap.

PC: [laughing] The quicker you lose.

LB: Yeah. And the thing, also, that really, really -- for example when I kept thinking about Mark Rothko, and they settled the lawsuit for $9 million. Jee-sus Christ Almighty.

PC: Yes.

LB: No, no, I tell you - did you see my little Rothko? [PC says yes] . . .wanted to give me a big one. I was then living in a studio, a little tiny room. I said, "Mark, where the hell am I going to put this big monster? Give me a small." He said, "I don't paint small."

PC: Yes.

LB: I said, "You're a lot of crap, you find --" He found this small one, he gave it to me. I used to go to see him. As a matter of fact I was with him the week that he committed suicide, on a Wednesday -- I was with him on the previous Saturday. See, when he moved to 69th Street, it was very easy. You see, he had a studio in the Bowery and he had a studio on 54th Street at that time -- it as years and years ago. I used to see him on 69th . It as always very nice to go, he was always very happy to see me. He would play the record: "Oh, Lenny, I am forgotten, I am isolated, nobody knows I'm around." And I would say, "Oh, Mark, what are you, kidding? You made art history, you're in all the books, you've made yourself a niche, no matter what happens you're the --" And every time. . . so it finally got to be a joke. And I'd say to him, "There goes the record again. How do you - now tell me you're forgotten. Tell me that nobody knows you." He was very, very sweet, he was really. . . Now Pollock, on the other hand, I had a warm little session with him. I had heard, the story, the gossip was that he was a mean son of a bitch, he was -- nasty drunk -- But Mark was very. . . And DeKooning's a very sweet guy, very nice. They're all these guys, all of them. Like, my son once came back -- by the way, he did go to Berkeley and get his MFA and he's now teaching, he's working for Apartment Life -- he came one Christmas, and we're sitting around, and he said to me, "Gee, Dad, you knew them all the way back when. Wasn't there something about DeKooning or Rothko or Morris Louis that you knew they were going to make it?" I said, "Get lost! Before I give you a sock in the jaw." [both laugh] I said, "They were just one of the boys." It's like people have asked me, "Who's going to be the next De Kooning? Who could I buy?"

PC: You must get that question every week.

LB: "Who can I buy for a hundred bucks that'll be worth, you know, a hundred thousand?" Stuff like that.

PC: Whom else.

LB: It's unbelievable. If I knew it I'd do it myself, you know. . . .these fellow that were learning to paint -- this is what I say about the Project:

PC: It gave them time and materials.

LB: It gave them time, it gave them materials, and they didn't have to worry about the rent. And the $23.86 -- I can't tell you how rich everybody was. Oh boy! [he laughs] They used to go down to the Project, I remember, and get brushes and canvas, and they had to turn in --

PC: What did you pay for paint in those days?

LB: It was never a big problem. Paint was not -- and nobody painted large. See, scale - this is a very interesting. See, the thing that built my business was what I call Bellini. By the way, when we started to make machine-ground paint, we called it Bellini.

PC: Why Bellini?

LB: Well, I wanted something to go with a B. In fact, when I named this paint Magna, I couldn't find a name to go with B. So, what happened -- when I went to art school, paint was no big problem. One set of colors, maybe -- white or blue or black or. . . Now, after the War, scale took off in painting. Like, if you went to art school, you did a 12 x 16, or 16 x 20, or an 18 x 24 -- a big canvas. So, a painting 3 feet by 5 feet was a small canvas. Not only was there larger scale but thick painting. I used to get complaints: One guy said, "Oh, Lenny, I can't afford your paint anymore." And I'll never forget, this fellow made a wonderful gesture, like he's squeezing a tube of paint: "You go like this and it's a dollar!" [he laughs] So one day I was in a drugstore. And on a counter I see a little tube of toothpaste, Colgate. This big 25 cents, this big 35 cents -- you know -- big, big tube for 75 cents. So I go

back and talk to this guy that was working with me, this famous production guy, and I say, "Sam, there's a lesson in this for us. What the hell, does toothpaste cost nothing?" We began to figure it out, and we had calculated that -- we had the big tubes, what they call the pound size tubes for white. So we figured out that the equivalent of that tube in volume holds four of the studio type. So there's 150cc, or five ounces in that tube. And we could -- we did it. And it was an enormous saving at manufacturing levels. We had no labels, we had to scotch-tape a silly little label. [PC laughs] It was packaging. But it shows you, if you fill a need -- so I took it to some of my friends. And oh my God, they carried on. First of all, they --

PC: "Too big, where you going to put it?"

LB: They thought it was stupid, yes. "So who needs all that paint? Who's going to spend $3 for a tube of paint? What's the matter with you? You're going to ruin the whole oil paint business." I said, "Try it. I'm not running away. If you don't sell it, I'll give you your money back. Don't pay me." And we took an ad in the art magazines, with four tubes of paint and the money, and with that whole thing of the Chinese -- we were giving away $15 worth of paint for $12.95, with a Chinese menu or two from column one, one from column two. I've advertised many times since then. The response was enormous. And pretty soon this king-sized tube we were selling more of that [than] anything else. And the Bellini king-size tube really built the business. We really were filling a need. Now, to give you an idea of the competition, nobody came out with a king-size tube for 12 years. I was the only one. And finally Permanent Pigments came out with a king-sized tube, and this is in 1962. And very, very curiously --

PC: And who came out with a pound tube?

LB: We did in 1947.

PC: Oh, Permanent Pigments came out with it.

LB: Yes. They called it [inaudable] and they didn't give Permanent Pigments quality, they cut our prices, if you took the cap off oil ran out, and it was a terrible mess. So the big laugh was, at that time, somewhere along the line the acrylics -- now, people think there's just one acrylic. I was the first to make an acrylic resin which could mix with both oil and turpentine.

PC: What started all of that?

LB: Well, it was started because I had a curiosity about it. And I'll tell you the beginning of it. It started about November 1941, some guy walked into the shop -- Tony [inaudable] is his name -- with something like white syrup. I said, "What's that?" He said, "It's an acrylic." Frankly, I'd never heard the term. "What the hell's an acrylic?" He says, "It's a synthetic resin. And being very scientific," he said, "it's swell stuff."

PC: Right! [both laugh]

LB: There are about 200 more variations. People think -- the acylics they know is like Liquitex and acrylic polymer emusion. So I said, "Let's make some white." He put the white on the table. I don't know what the hell that stuff was, but it was terrible -- like rubber cement, like putty, it didn't brush, very gummy. But what really got me was how white it was. See, linseed oil. . . Now, all the reputable color-makers do not grind their whites with linseed oil anymore, it's all done with safflower oil, or --

PC: When did that change happen?

LB: Oh, at least 15 years ago, [reconsidering] -- 10 -- 12 years ago. About '65, '66. Linseed oil does yellow -- white especially. So anyway, they had made this stuff. And that was 1941. Then the War came and it was hard to get materials. After the War I went down to Rohm & Haas -- they made the acrylics, they're the biggest supplier. I told them what I wanted to do, I wanted something compatible with linseed oil because I knew artists were using it. And they came -- they were very helpful to me. They came out with this paint. Well, I want to tell you something: the resistance was enormous. In fact, today, now the paint is really taking on. I spent all my money promoting -- because I think it's great paint. And I came out with sets of paint and. . . See, the word acrylic now is in the language. There's nothing strange about it, it's not a foreign -- like somebody was telling me certain new words like "print-out" "television" -- all the cliches that have come on, you know, due to certain inventions. So, artists would say, "Acrylic -- what's that?" I'd say, "It's a synthetic resin." "Oh, I don't want that shit, I want the real stuff." And I handed out, literally, hundreds of sets --

PC: What as in a set?

LB: Twelve tubes, 12 skinny little tubes. As a sampler. And I would tell them, "It's not like a fast-drying oil, you've got to work with this at least twice." Because a lot of fellows said, "I tried it and it's no good." [laughing heartily] Morris, on the other hand, tried it and he found himself. And he said, "Part of my thesis is that materials

influence form." And I know a lot of the guys have told me that without acrylics they could not have gone -- see, in the post-war period, Pollack really started this abstract expressionism and gave it such a shot in the arm. And he used Magna -- all the late Pollocks were painted with Magna. They use Magna at the metropolitan, at the Oberlin, at the National Gallery in London, for restoration; it's great for restoration. So, Magna kept me poor. I spent a lot of money promoting it. The only place where it was used was when I would demonstrate it. A teacher would get hooked on it and order it for the class.

PC: So you'd go out and talk to the schools and. . .

LB: Yes. I must tell you about my unique way of selling, when I was a kid, too, is what it is. But to come back to that lecture business in a minute. Now, in '62, -- again, artists have been very, very helpful to me. They'd tell me -- you know, "I need more paint, the king-size tube." Now they were telling me -- well, I was the first one to make an acrylic resin. Permanent Pigments was the first one to make an acrylic polymer emulsion. And in those days, when they came out with it was about 1956, it was in a little jar, very liquidy, very thin --

PC: Oh right, glass jars.

LB: Yes. This friend of mine that used to say it said, "Gee, this is interesting but why can't you make something like that more mixable, that would have some viscosity, some paste, something you could model with?" And I began to fool around with it, and we developed a paint, about 1962. We put it out in a squeeze bottle -- that was another great --

PC: Squeeze bottle?

LB: You know, like shampoo -- a 3 ounce squeeze bottle. It gave them a lot of paint, gave them a cheap price -- nobody liked the packet -- put the same goddamn paint in tubes. And at that time, right about that time Permanent Pigments came out with tubes also. I don't know if they beat me by a couple of months but it was all around 1962-63. At that time also New Masses had come on the scene with a clear plastic tube which was so beautiful and so impractical, it ruined everything.

PC: Really? Why?

LB: Well, you see, firstly they made two big mistakes. One, it was a co-polymer, which was a combination of acrylic and vinyl -- the reason they used vinyl is that it's slow-drying and very cheap, and it also gets very gummy; and two, then the tube never really collapses, so when you squeeze some paint, it just sucks back air.

PC: Dried up inside, all a mess.

LB: Yes, it was a terrible mess. Hunt really - that's another story. They wanted to buy me, and I said, "I'm not for sale." So I bought them and they paid dearly for it. Now, when I came out with the -- again, the innovation of the king-sized tube, I came out with the acrylic in a king-sized studio, king-sized tube, and for about three years I had the market to myself with the king-sized tube. I could sell it against the competition. Well, that didn't last long. They all had learned a lesson. Now everybody had a king-sized tube. Then I came out with a pint-sized can of white, oil white. And now everybody has pint size. [PC laughs heartily] They say, you know, imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. But you know, they have, like, all these salesmen, it's a question of selling, marketing things. It's become, you know -- Grumbacher -- like I have 35 people working for me, Grumbacher has 40 salesmen! [he laughs]

PC: Really?

LB: Oh yes. They're a big, big deal. Now [name of company] has taken them over. You know Binney & Smith, they have the Crayola people. Crayola -- my God, it's sold all over the world -- in shoe stores, in grocery shops -- everywhere. My association has always been with the artists, and I've always --

PC: But now how did -- what interested you in the new acrylics?

LB: Oh, the thing that got me was the white, the white was so startling white. In fact, we used to make jokes about it, call it "jet white" -- you know, jet black. And that was our first make of white. Then I was encouraged to make a line of -- and I was always kind of interested in --

PC: And it was almost done like kitchen chemistry.

LB: Yes. And Rohm & Haas was very, very helpful. They have this huge building just for research and development.

PC: What did they think when you went to see them?

LB: Oh, they said I was a big, big deal. Oh sure. Like, I told a friend of mine down at University of Miami who was working with their Plexiglas, and I said, "Write them a letter, tell them you need some samples of Plexiglas because you're teaching a few students. So write on university stationary." He was doing some kind of -- he said they sent him about $2,000 worth of stuff. They'll do things like that to develop a whole new field. Very, very nice people, I really still deal with them.

PC: You've become a big client.

LB: Oh yes. We buy a lot of the emulsions. The [word missing] is still not very popular. Like, he'd get letters three or four times a week from artists all over the country about "Where can I get Magna?" And of course the big people that started with Magna were Morris Louis and Ken Noland and [Jules] Olitsky and Helen Frankentahler and --

PC: But how -- did you get to them, did you know them, did they get to know you, -- what's the sequence of events in a way?

LB: Well, Morris Louis --

PC: How did he come into the picture, now?

LB: Oh, Christ A'mighty, how did anybody come -- See, the small kind of little world that we lived in -- Like, Morris was on the Project. I must tell you about what is called "Bocour Breadline." When you grind paint, you make a batch of colors, you can't make the thing come out even that fills every tube, there's always a bit of paint left over.

PC: Right.

LB: Now, if there was enough paint left over to fill half a tube, I put it in a metal tube. If it was just a big squeeze, you know, a blob, I'd put it in a piece of waxed papers and add a little tray -- a little letter tray -- and guys would come around and I'd say, "Help yourself." And [laughing] Morris Louis was one of my steady customers. The fellow you remember -- like he's the big hero. When I go around talking about acrylics, the only one that they really ask me about is Morris Louis.

PC: Really?

LB: They don't ask me about Ken Noland, they don't ask me about Helen Frankenthaler, they don't ask me about Jules Olitsky --

PC: Why is that, do you think?

LB: He is the big hero. Michael Fried wrote this big book that Abrams published -- the back that has the big footnotes [overlapping voices for several phrases plus laughter] I don't know. How did Mark Rothko come to be a -- how did De Kooing, a whole bunch of guys. . . In the beginning, you see, I used to call on them. Like I'd call on you, and you say "listen, if you have a friend --" and you'd say, "Yes, go call on Charlie So-and-So," and he'd give you his address, and you'd go there. You just keep walking up and down knocking on doors. And then after a while we had this shop at 2 West 15th Street and people came to shop and --

PC: I'm curious about the whole Morris Louis activity, because you said he's a hero to all these people.

LB: Yes. Like Jackson Pollack was a hero to our generation.

PC: That generation, yes.

LB: Now Mark [Rothko] is -- they ask about who are interested in staining, they all talk about Morris Louis.

PC: You lecture, right?

LB: How I got into this unique selling bit [he laughs] -- and I may as well tell you, I don't go to hear myself talk, I hope to sell paint. And so, like for example I'm invited to a school. Here's a fact: I have to be in Minneapolis October 27-28 because our trade association is having a mini-regional convention. So I write to my friend Peter at the University of Minnesota, and I say, "Dear Pete, I have to be -" oh, yes, he wrote me a letter and he wanted me to be there in March. Now I write him and I say, "Dear Pete, I can't come in March but I'm going to come in October." Then, Jerry Houseman [sp] is another guy I know, head of the College of Art, in Minneapolis, I write to him and I just got back a letter, I send the letter over to Arensburg, Munziger [sp], what-the-hell, that I have to be away that week, and so on and so on. Then I have the directory of all the art schools. I've been through this before -- St. Charles, St. Peter's; I write and say I'm going to be in your area. I give three talks -- one is called "The Age of Acrylics" in which I deal with new developments, another is called "The Permanent Palette" which

has to do with traditional materials and traditional pigments and canvases, and the third one is sort of what we're doing -- the 40s, the 50s, the 60s -- the turning away from form and content to, you know, space and color and the non-figurative idiom. And I give a lecture.

PC: Do you have slides or materials or --

LB: No. Mainly I demonstrate with the paints. Then I give them literature. In fact I brought some literature for you [he laughs]-- an article I wrote with a guy who works for me, he's a chemist, on how acrylics are made, which I think you might be interested to read.

PC: That was the American Artist one?

LB: Yes. And I got invited -- in fact, for years until last summer, since 1961 I would go to Norfolk [Connecticut]. And then I taught at the Brooklyn Museum art school, and I taught, oh for 10 years, at Skowhegan.

PC: What did you teach?

LB: A materials course. We would make paint, we would make varnishes, we would make canvas, we would make gesso panels -- you know. Oh, at Skowhegan I had, besides Alex Katz and Lee [?] and Robert Indiana. Who the hell else was there. . .

PC: A lot of people.

LB: Oh yes. I'll tell you about that school, it gives me a big pain in the neck.

PC: [laughs] Why?

LB: They start with this "Junior Miss."

PC: Oh, it's trying to be a big social number --

LB: Yes, yes. We who were in on the beginning, like Henry B[?] -- poor old Henry is dead, but -- we had a whole different idea. Of course, he ran it one year. You're not related to Bill Cummings, are you?

PC: No.

LB: Well, Bill -- this is another great thing -- he was really devoted to that school. At the beginning, it was he who really got a great idea about visiting artists. We used to [breaks up laughing] like, from October to April, we were, like, window-dressing. We would go meet the so-called patrons of the arts -- the Park Avenue ladies. We'd be invited, and talk about the school in order to get a scholarship. And you know [inaudable]in those days was married to Joe Louis, and Margaret Louis had really supported the school in the early days. That poor school cost her a fortune. She'd call up a friend, in those days -- I think tuition was $600, a scholarship was $500 -- she'd call up her different friends and say, "You know, my son-in-law, who went to art school, is involved with an art group, we need $500." They'd call ten people. And these ten people would call her. [both laugh loudly at the same time] You'd have to --

PC: Trade off.

LB: That's it.

PC: Sure, sure.

LB: Poor Joe was telling me, "Lord, mother was --"

PC: Every party was costing ten!

LB: That's right. You know, after all, if I didn't give it to the art school, give it to my favorite charity. And the school -- of course, it's a great school. The only other school that I thought was better -- and not that the teaching was better, or the food was better, nothing like that -- it was the Yale school. The Yale summer school at Norfolk was all scholarships. They would invite 50 schools to send slides and photographs. They would pick 35. And these 35 kids got a free ride -- all you needed was the fare to Norfolk, Connecticut. Now, I think, they charge $200. One summer they charged $50. Where did the money go? I don't know, the money's gone. But that was all scholarship and it was real great. And every summer I would be invited with Lee at Skowhegan. I've been there a few times, just to give lectures, not to teach.

PC: How much time would you spend up there, on teaching?

LB: Oh, three weeks. It was a course that I gave in the middle of the summer. And everybody took it, all the painters. It was really very, very, very - [hesitating]. . . As a matter of fact, I got a call the other day and if my life depended on it I would never, ever remember his name. . . Seymour Tubis called me up from Santa Fe. He teaches at the American School of Art, the American Indian -- at Santa Fe, something like that. He says, "You don't remember me, but I was your assistant when you were teaching at the Brooklyn Museum art school." And I swear to God, I don't remember him. So I said, "Really?" He wanted -- he'd been buying my paints from a distributor in Los Angeles, and he thought he'd get a better deal from me -- which , of course, he would. So I sent him a whole bunch of --

PC: I'm very curious about all the technical books that have come out on paints.

LB: Oh, well, Ralph Meyer -- oh God, is he a fuddy duddy.

PC: Now, what does a book like that do as far as you're concerned? How does it affect you?

LB: Oh me, it's really great -- you see, I feel there's a big deficiency in our art training. Like, you take a kid and you bring him into an art school, and you teach him a little bit about composition, a little bit about one color, a little bit about perspective, what the hell -- And I am not a big believer in self-expression, you know [laughs]. So, now, so much went on -- you know, a lot of -- what shall I say? -- carelessness in their work. Like, I believe, let the craftsmanship come first. And from the craftsmanship comes the art. You've got to learn your materials and learn how to use them, etc. etc. And part of this is my "pitch" to the art students that I teach, that now I find they're not learning. These books are very, very helpful. As a matter of fact, [he laughs] I must tell you a crazy story. Some kid wrote me from Santa Cruz, where she's doing a project on research materials, and that she would like to visit the factory and so forth. She came, I took her through, and I sent her a set of Magna, I sent her a set of Aquatex, and she would do research. And then I later gave a talk at her school -- she invited me. And I don't know if you're familiar with the sculptor Jack Zajac?

PC: Oh yes, yes.

LB: He's a friend of mine and he was very happy to invite me, and I went there and I gave a talk. It was at the end of a series of talks. I never like to go to one place. Like, when I was at California that time, I did a tour of the area -- I spoke at Oakland, at Berkeley. It's so funny: my son is at Berkeley, and I said, "I'm coming to visit." And I said, "Gee, while I'm there, I might as well give a talk." I'd been there, like, twice already. "Do you have to, Dad?" [both laugh]

PC: Did you do it?

LB: No! Wait a minute -- that was the thing: he regretted it. And I had made other arrangements -- I was going off to Seattle. So, when I was visiting he had all the graduates there. He said, "Well, the fellows want to meet you." We had kind of a rap session, and I took 12 kids to lunch. [he laughs]

PC: It sounds as though you get a lot of letters from people -- artists, lay people. They want solutions to problems, they want colors and mediums and --

LB: Oh sure, sure. I just had a letter from a guy in England who wants some underpainting white because he depends on the kindness of his industrial friends to send him some 10 different brands. And he said, "They send me Grumbacher and [?] pigments that I really don't like, yours is the only one that really works for me."

PC: Do you sell abroad?

LB: Yes, As a matter of fact, we have quite an international --

PC: I mean, in stores in England and France --

LB: No, no. We do sell in stores in Europe. The business is a very interesting development. In 1965, I got a letter from a man in Munich, Germany, [inaudable], telling me that they would like to -- that they'd heard I made the finest acrylic in America, but they would like to see my exclusive -- they were prepared to place a $10,000 order and they wanted a 10-year exclusive contract. I went to my lawyer and said, "Make me a contract." You know about lawyers? [PC laughs] I will tell you.

PC: He said, "Nine thousand."

LB: No, no, that too. But my lawyer says, "Who is this bum? What do you know about him?" I said, "What do you mean? What do I have to know about him? He wants to give me a $10,000 order." My business in Europe, as a man whose clients exaggerate, it might be $500 a year. Like this guy would go to Florence, and somebody would go to Athens, you mail him $18 worth of paint, or $35 worth of paint. That would be the big deal. So I tried to explain to him, that's $10,000, $500 is more than income. He said, "Nah, you're foolish. You're giving away a

million dollar market for a lousy $10,000. Ten years is a long time; tell him two years.: So I write him, and he writes me, and the amount of money we were to spend for promotion. Finally, we're not getting anywhere. And using the wisdom of Solomon, I write to him and say, "We're never going to settle this through the mail, I'm willing to pay half your expenses to if you come to new York, you pay half my expenses to go to Munich." [We] decided on New York, and he spent a week here. And we went to the lawyer and we gave him everything he wanted. And their [?] was the greatest. We ship stuff to Munich and they sell in 15 European countries. We are in Rome, in Florence, Athens; and he just wrote me a letter that he just came back from a trip to Persia. Now, they don't call it Persia anymore -- Iran. So he said to me, "We put out an Aquatex in Persia." We're in Geneva, we're in Amsterdam -- in fact I got a card the other day from Bobby [?] in Holland saying that "Bocour is well represented here."

PC: [laughing] So your spies feed information back to you.

LB: Harvey's is also another one of my wards of state. I one pulled on of the greatest coups of my career. [laughs] The "Three Musketeers" were Harvey Quakeman, Alan Covey, and Murray Wright . These three guys used to come around and shop, and they were grousing around on discounts and -- so I said, "Listen, fellow, why don't you give me a painting?" For God's sake, you know -- counting their pennies. So they said, "Okay." At that time Marica Tucker was working at the Whitney. I said, "Marcia, I've got three great paintings for you." So, rather than her trying to come to the studio, it was just as easy to send -- so I sent the paintings to the Whitney. She told me that she liked the paintings but she'd seen better work. I said, "Go to the studio, pick anything you want!" [laughs] So, she did. And the big coup was that the paintings were $1,500, and she gave them each $500 cash. And they got into the Whitney Annual. I was supposed to give them $1,000 worth of paint, which I did over a period of time. So that was that.

PC: Well, a lot of artists have traded pictures.

LB: Oh, sure. The trade medical services, dental services, everything. Barter is a real activity.

PC: Did you say you have two sales representatives that travel around the country?

LB: Well, now, I have more than two. You see, I can't afford to hire a salesman, so you have a guy which is called a rep. He handles brushes, canvas, paper -- all sorts. You give him a territory, like, I have a man in New England, who covers Connecticut, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Maine, Vermont. They go where they have their business. We have a guy down in Jersey, Pennsylvania, Ohio, West Virginia, Washington -- you know, that area.

PC: Like the book business -- breaks it up into --

LB: Then we have a fellow down south, in North Carolina, South Carolina. And we also have distributors. And in Europe, we do have a great international system, I will say this. We're great in Canada.

PC: Really?

LB: Oh, I have lectured in every university from Halifax to Vancouver. I've been to Edmonton -- in fact, I was invited by the --

PC: You haven't had trouble with the Canadian-American political system?

LB: No. As a matter of fact I was a speaker at the Canadian College Art -- they call it "University Professors," something like that, at Edmonton. That was quite an experience. You know, when you go park your car you plug it in the heater to prevent the oil from freezing. I'm invited to the next meeting they're having, in February in Halifax --

PC: Another chilly place.

LB: Oh, boy. The university bookstores are a very, very good outlet to teach. The teachers -- see, there's nothing that teaches the teachers the new system. I dare say you can tell anybody anything once. We do have a superb acrylic. I think it's the best. You know, I could show you laboratory proof, but golly, Liquitex outsells us a million to one.

PC: But how many colors and things-- do you keep adding colors, or do you have a basic --

LB: Sometimes you add. You try not to. We have, like, 36 colors. When you go to add a color, then you screw up the rack and you screw up the color chart and it gets to be a big, big pain in the neck. But you pick out certain colors like -- for example, in AQUATEX our acrylic poly emulsion, we make three colors that nobody else makes -- unbleached titanium -- I tell the kids, "You've got to be careful with this color, it's like a narcotic, once you use it you're going to be hooked." And we make alizarin crimson, and we make green-gold. These are three rather

unique colors. But as a "celebrated lecturer," you go around and you've go to get - like, I go to Missouri the week of September 18. And the week of October 2nd, I'm going to Cleveland.

PC: Gosh, you're on the road all the time.

LB: Yes. Well, see, the school year is a peculiar year. You can be very busy from October/September till Thanksgiving. After Thanksgiving there's mid-terms and holidays, then nothing much happens until the middle of February. So that's about the size of that. And I'm going to be in Minnesota and I know there's two places I'm going to be. Then I wrote to some St. Charles/St. Paul friends, there's a whole bunch of them. And the, the lectures are pretty interesting.

PC: What do you do in a demonstration? What, sort of, really happens?

LB: Well, first of all you explain to them -- like, see, with the acrylics you explain to them -- these kids for the most part are rather ignorant, they think that there is one acrylic. And actually there are about 250. In fact, the automobiles are painted with acrylic -- thermo. . . . . .ic acrylic it's like an enamel. And I talk about Magna. You put up a little systemetry on the emulsion. I used to, when I was very young and innocent, first started visiting schools, I'd stop and do a painting -- do a table with flowers or. . . The things is this: you have -- the minute, I found, as a performer, the minute you stop talking, you lose your audience. You must not have what you call dead silence.

PC: Oh, you've got to keep the words going.

LB: The painting -- well, you can't paint anything decent in seven minutes, or five minutes. As soon as you stop, they're talking to each other, and then they're looking -- I'll never forget this kid that was sitting very close, I heard him say, "Jeeze that stinks." [both laugh] You know, it's silly, so now I don't attempt anything like that, I just diddle with some abstraction --

PC: Brush it on.

LB: Brush it on. And I wipe it down.

PC: What kind of problems have you had, because you mentioned conservatories and people using some of this, have you had problems with the early use of paint, like Morris Louis?

LB: No, with Morris Louis the only thing, the big problem with him was that tubes were nothing. So I used to make it for him in gallon cans. Now, to make a gallon of paint, is the most, oh God, the most uneconomical thing, where you could not make any money. Like, for example, when I first started to make gallons of paint --

PC: What would you sell a gallon of paint for?

LB: To make a gallon of, say, cadmium yellow requires six pounds of cadmium. Six pounds of cadmium in those days -- well, I can't . . . but, say, $6 a pound. So, $36. Then the methacrylics, the resins. And then there's the laser that came along. Cutting is the costliest part. The actual cost to me would be at lest $40. Now, I'm in the paint business. And if you came to me and I said a gallon of paint costs $40, you'd call me a goddamn thief.

PC: I was talking to somebody the other day that buys copper-charged paint for a yacht, it's like $120 a gallon or something? These are tons. They weight 30 or 40 pounds. Keeps of the sharks and bugs and whatever.

LB: Keeps off the barnacles, yes. Now, reds were $45 here, colors were cheap, like $15. But to make it, and all my correspondence with Morris was "Where's my paint?" I have a letter from him, I could show it to you, it's almost a document, in which he says, "I just got out of the hospital, I've got this lung cancer, a lung removed, I'm going in for cobalt" at that time. "I need these paints, my time is -- knowing you as I do -- I have to squeeze it in, in between, at night or something." So I would say, "Morris, anticipate your needs." He'd call me up and say, "Where's my paint?" What the hell is a tube of paint to him, because his paintings were 8 feet by 15 feet, you know. I'll never forget, Lawrence Alloway called me, he wanted to see me. He was going to give Morris Louis his first show, after he'd died, about a year and a half. He came to see me: "What can you tell me about Morris Louis?" I said, "What the hell is there to tell you? I can't tell you anything about him, he just painted." [laughing] He didn't cut off his ear, he didn't go crazy, he worked from sunup to sundown. Like Cezanne. Nothing dramatic. You couldn't make a movie out of Cezanne's life, you know. Just painted; that's all he did was paint. "That's all he did was paint. I couldn't tell you about him."

PC: Did you see him in Washington?

LB: Oh, sure, sure. Well, now, have you ever talked to [Clement] Greenberg about these things? Has he ever talked to you?

LB: Yes, yes. Clem -- let me tell you this story. Ken Noland went to Black Mountain College.

PC: Right.

LB: And Clem Greenberg taught there.

PC: Right, that's what I meant.

LB: Now, Clem goes to Washington to see Ken Noland's work. Meanwhile, Ken and Morris have become good friends. And Ken says to Clem, "You've got to see this guy's work. He's terrific." So he took him to Morris, and that's how he got hooked on -- that's how he contacted Morris Louis. Oh, sure, I knew Morris when he was on the WPA, and he was not a primitive, although he'd gone to the Maryland Art Institute, and was not largely self-taught, as they say. But the paintings were shitty, they were dirty, they were murky -- really terrible. [I'd] say "What the hell are you doing?" And when he started to work with Magna -- a few of them, I remember one in there -- [laughs] you see the stripe, the one stripe. And then these darn things start to -- you know, I've always been very anti-relating paintings to money and all that sort of thing, but you can't help it, you know --

PC: Oh I know.

LB: -- $100,000, $125,000 -- my God, you know, it is just absolutely mad. I love this little Ken Noland [laughs] this was, like, a gift of the artist. One day I will say, they really -- you know, I took care of them when they were really broke. I will say a lot of them are very grateful and they're still my friends, they're still -- like little Philip Perlstein. We have a house on Fire Island; he came to visit us. He said, "Ruth, I must paint you in this chair." We have a deck chair. "I've got to bring you a drawing to the house." You know, it's a nice gesture and all that thing. I have about six or eight of his drawings. You know, I kept them alive. [laughs heartily] Before that house on [?] Street. He used to live here on 99th. So, there are a lot of them like Morris. Money was always the big problem. I tell you, sometimes when I think about it -- like, you asked me, -- I really puzzle about how do I live? I've got to remember I got married, I wanted to get married and I was thinking, "I'm not getting any younger." You know, the idea was the only way to change your life is to settle down, and you get a wife and a child and a home. I never really -- I always had these filthy studios which were not all that inhabitable [laughing].

PC: Moving around from place to place.

LB: Yes. I used to pack up and go -- in the summertime to Woodstock. Like, this building that I rent in Garnerville -- it's huge, it's a whole block. I remember when I first saw it. I came back and said to Ruth, "I feel like a captain of industry." It's a whole two floors, 40,00 square feet, and the rent was very reasonable -- a little less than we were paying for half the space in new York. And much more usable. If I had an architect to design em a building, this would be the way I'd design it. 20,000 square feet on a floor, two floors, and elevator and everything. But the art world. . . I've seen so many changes. The thing that really gets me, it became a kind of status thing, and the jet set gets --

PC: What do you think created all that?

LB: I think it's the money. Somebody told me, "Art goes where money is." And then you read about all these galleries opening in Houston, you know. And thirdly [laughing] I'm still reminded that Joey Bishop said, "I was rich, I was poor, it's better to be rich." It's in the nerves and you pay the bills and so forth. I sometimes puzzle about myself. I look around and I see people that work for me, whose names I don't even know. We have a group there, and, you know, I used to have two or three kids, I worked with them, right in there grinding the paints -- go to their weddings. . . Now a bunch of kids that -- we have Haitians up there, we have Puerto Ricans, we have hillbillies, they all --

PC: How big a town is it?

LB: Oh, tiny. As I say it's not even on the automobile maps. It's a suburb of Haverstraw, Spring Valley, [?] City -- right close to there. And I discovered we have a church that's a kind of a cultural center -- they have a sculptor, David Weinrich [sp] he had a show. . .

PC: He lives up there, doesn't he?

LB: Yes. He's big with the church. They're putting up a place, so they came to get some paints. [laughs] So I said to David, "You ought to pay me. Bring me a piece of sculpture." [laughs]

PC: I think he does sculpture, anyway.

LB: Yes. He sends me. . .

PC: What [?] sort of is going on in the art material world now that's new or that's going to appear? Are you doing

--

LB: Well, we were fooling around with epoxies but it's still in the very, very early stage. And then we kind of try to innovate something, like they say, "We came out -- " I came out with the magna in acrylics. Not everybody knows the term acrylic, you know, whether it's made of acrylic soup. . . Nobody thinks two ways about it. The word "synthetic," for example. When you said "synthetic resin," you know, right away thought synthetic was something phony, a cheap substitute --

PC: Well, initially it was, in many cases.

LB: Yes but the point is, if you look in the dictionary, "synthetic" is a synthesis. You have to explain this to the kids. But the art world, there are so many artists now. I think the whole gallery setup is a thing that's passJ. I think the artists will have to sell from the studios.

PC: Beginning to do more. They don't want all the hassle.

LB: Well, the point is that everybody was sure you'd have to have an agent and sell, you know, but the fact of the matter is that the galleries -- like, a friend of mine is with a very respectable gallery, in fact a couple of guys, with [Antoinette] Kraushaar -- still very respectable -- but she didn't do much for them.

PC: Well, she's being old too, for one thing.

LB: Yes, I just saw her recently. I was at a party. She must be 80-something -- got to be. Sweet old gal.

PC: Oh, marvelous.

LB: What's going to happen with that place? There are no heirs --

PC: No family. Nothing.

LB: It's a terrible thing.

PC: One always wonders about --

LB: Yes, like for example -- I must say, I have over 500 paintings. Not only what you see here in the shop. And I started giving them away. You know, you go to a school, and they haven't got a nickel for acquisitions. In fact, I just had a fellow come yesterday from St. Mary's College [of Maryland], where they're inducting me on June 22 for their honorary -- organization, or club, what would it be? Oh, "The Order of the Mustard Tree." They're going to give me a big medal: it's like their Doctorate.

PC: Oh, fantastic.

LB: I've been giving things away - oh God: State Universities -- Rochester [SUNY], Binghamton [SUNY], Smith College, NYU [New York University]. In fact, I gave away -- 74, 75, 76 . . .I gave away about 87 paintings.

PC: Oh my goodness.

LB: But what do you do with these things? You see, I can't sell them. I've never sold a painting in my life. I've had experience with -- say, somebody would come in and say "I love that painting." The artists, for God's sake, have hundreds of them. [both laugh] My last was so funny. Jack Sollenberg [sp] -- I made a deal with him. So I go to his studio to pick out a painting. "Oh, Lenny, you can't have that. That's a thousand dollars." [both laugh] I said, "Come on, knock it off. What'll you give me for this thousand dollars bid?" Finally I [had] both of them for a thousand dollars. "Bring me $300 and we'll settle." So [laughing] finally I said, "Giving it to me is like putting it in a museum, I'm not going to sell it, I'm not in competition with you. So let's take it, this new painting to my office." And he said, "Yeah, that's right." That was up on 52nd Street, about six or seven years ago. And in come my insurance agent. My insurance agent's a real type, a real idiot. And he said, "Oh Lenny, you're going to love this. I just insured a Gauguin painting this big for $150,000." I said, "You go back to your client, tell him Bocour says to shove it. [both laugh] I will pay him a commission to spend $150,000 for a Gauguin if he will spend $1,500 on a living artist." I'm a big believer in the contemporary artist, the living guy. So he sees this painting in my office. "Gee, that's a swell painting." I said, "You like it?" He said, "Yes. Do you want to sell it?" I said, "What would you give for it?" That throws him, that throws him.

PC: Right. But it happens.

LB: Yes. He said, "What do you mean? What do you want?" I said, "I don't want anything. What would you give? Would you give $5, would you give $50, would you give $500, $5,000? What would you give for this painting?" He said, "Come on, Lenny, what are you doing? [both laughing] You buy it." I said, "You're going to buy it soon.

Let's say you have a $100 budget for a suit. If the suit's $110 you buy it, if it's $90 you buy it. But if the maker of that says 'I want $500 for this suit,' you're not going to buy it." It's the same with anything. Well, we argued back and forth. Finally we settled for $300. I said, "That is a firm offer?" He said, "Yes." I said, "Because I'm not getting the money." I called up Jack and said, "Hey Jack, you know that thousand dollar painting? [laughing heartily] I got a firm offer for $300. You want it?" He said, "Grab it!" So he mailed him the check -- I said, "You send the check to Jack Sollenberg." I went down there and replaced the painting, you know. [PC laughs loudly] I've done this, I'd say over a 20-year period, maybe four times. But I don't sell any paintings. So I give them away. And a goddamn collector is driving me up the wall.

PC: The IRS.

LB: It seems that if it's a gift -- first of all you've got to prove that it's a gift; I get my friends to write me, you know, "What'll you take for Christmas?" These are friends of mine. I get about ten or 12 letters -- gifts. If it's a gift you discover it's no good. The gift is the same as an artist -- you can only deduct the price of the materials. So the artist really gets screwed.

PC: Yes, I know. They don't give anything.

LB: Yes. So the way they do it is, I swap you, you give me my painting, I give you yours.

PC: You can't do that anymore either.

LB: Yes. I understand that they want to know about income --

PC: Right.

LB: -- and sales tax and stuff. So it's become -- so now, he wants me -- I'm still battling with him about it. I said, "You know, I think you're indecent." It's not -- first he said, "You should pay a capital gains tax." I said, "To give away paintings to pay -- why don't you go to hell." So, I don't know, he's playing around with me. I don't know what the hell's going to be -- this has been going on now since at least November. They picked up '74, '75, '76 -- yes, in '77 that's when he was examining me, and these went back. There are a lot of things, and I've been giving paintings away for years. And I don't take any what you call, like, exorbitant -- like $17,000 -- I hear stories, they give away some of these crummy English horses, you know, painted in 1812 or something . The thing that I feel is that if you love art, you have a moral obligation to the living artist. Sure, I would like to own a Cezanne. But unless you support the living artist, the guy who's actually practicing. . . That's why to give away paintings.

PC: ...one's own lifetime...

LB: Like I say, some of these kids never saw a hand-painted picture. [laughs]

PC: Right.

LB: And you go to a school - like, I could tell about this Noland at Rice State University [Rice University]. I went out there to give a talk. And the fellow -- Eddy Levine, chairman of the art department, showed me this new art center. And it's just being finished -- they're putting lights in, they're painting. And he said, "Look at this beautiful gallery. We don't have a goddamn thing to show here. And what's more, it took, like 20 years to get the money, although the state had said we should have an art center." And they don't have any money to have shows or anything. So I said, "Come to New York, I'll give you a bunch of paintings." So he came and they took a look at this Ken Noland. And they said, "Wow! Where'd you get this? We priced them once and it was $65,000 for a painting." Outrageous. You must know Siegel [sp].

PC: yes.

LB: She runs the Visual Arts Museum. So she was doing work -- when was it, about two years ago -- the early work of famous artists. She was having a Ken Noland show. She knew I had one of these and she came up. She said, "I may borrow it." Fortunately, she didn't. So she sent me the papers. And there was this one line, "What do you want this insured for?" So I went to speak with Bob Miller, who was then working for [inaudable]. And I tell him the story. "$65,000? Ridiculous! Nothing like that -- oh, where did they get this?" I said, "Well, what should I put down?" He said, "At the most, $30, $35,000." [both laugh loudly] I said, "It was only $3,000."

PC: No, it's incredible.

LB: Well, to come back to the living artist, as I say, I think it's a big wide beautiful world. If you need the [inaudable], use the figure and if you don't want the figure -- I've seen good and bad on every school. And I think -- I can't even imagine a society without art, -- what life would be like, you know. Living on Mars, or some glacier or something. And it's really what makes life interesting. I think the thing that keeps art alive are the artists.

They are the guys that really give their all for it.

[END OF INTERVIEW].