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# Oral history interview with Hans Burkhardt, 1974 November 25

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## Transcript

### Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Hans Burkhardt on November 25, 1974. The interview took place in Los Angeles,CA, and was conducted by Paul J. Karlstrom for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Also present - Mrs. Thordis Burkhardt and Jean-Luc Bordeaux, Professor of Art History, California State University at Northridge, where Mr. Burkhardt has also taught for a number of years.

### Interview

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, Hans, what I would like to do in this interview is to record information that you feel is relevant concerning your own life - your background, your career as a painter, experience in Europe and New York, and here in the Los Angeles area. And I thought maybe we could start by briefly discussing your family background in Europe, when you were born, where you were born and then maybe some of your early interests in art and early training in art as well and sort of carry it along from there.

HANS BURKHARDT: Well, I was born in Basel on December 20, 1904. My father left for America in 1907 when I was three years old hoping to get us over here. When he got there, there was a depression; there was no work whatsoever. I was just six years old when my mother died of tuberculosis and we had nobody, so we were brought up in a city home. And during that time - it was during the First World War, we never had enough to eat. We were very, very poor. All we did was work all the time. There was no art or music or anything - just work, work, work.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What kind of work did you do or were you able to do at that time?

HANS BURKHARDT: We had to saw wood and, you know, clean all the time, like slaves. There was absolutely no life. Then when I was fourteen years old, going on fifteen, I had to learn a trade. You could learn gardening or tailoring - there were about five trades - that's all you could learn at that time. So I decided I wanted to be a gardener. So I went to learn how to be a gardener, and what I learned in three years, I could have picked up in one month, at the most. Otherwise I just worked from twelve to fourteen hours a day; I worked like a slave, never got anything - never enough to eat - never got a penny. During the three years I worked there, I never got a penny. When I was through with my apprenticeship, I got a job in Basel, as helper to a gardener, but in the winter there was no work, because the ground was frozen. So I went to work at Sandoz, the chemical factory in Basel. There I worked in the laboratory, and it was interesting. But somehow I wasn't happy in Switzerland, so I wrote my father that I would love to come to America. He said fine. It took about half a year before I got my visa, and early in November, 1924, I came to America and lived with my father and (he had married again) my step-mother, and we had a wonderful life together. Then my father asked what I would like to do. All I knew was gardening, but there were no gardens in New York. Then I said I would like to paint, but I thought you could only do that as a hobby. But my father was the foreman at the finest furniture factory in New York, Schmieg and Kotzian, and he said I could work there, in the decorating department, but I would have to go to Cooper Union and study, and learn all the different periods. So after working nine hours a day, I went every night and all day Saturday, to Cooper Union. I copied all the old panels, and got an education in French and Italian painting, and I used it in the shop. I decorated Chinese cabinets, too, and I made a very good living. Then, in 1928, my step-mother died from cancer of the breast. That same year, on Christmas Day, my father was killed in an automobile accident. I had nobody now except a young step-brother. I had been saving my money, and had planned to go to Paris, to study painting, but now I couldn't go. But it turned out for the best. At Cooper Union, after the first year, I got first prize in design, and they said they could not teach me any more. I tried to get into the life class, but it was full. So I went to Grand Central School of Art, and there I met Arshile Gorky. And that was the best thing that could ever have happened.

JEAN-LUC BORDEAUX: That was in 1928, when you met Gorky?

HANS BURKHARDT: Yes, in 1928 I went to Grand Central School of Art and met Gorky. He was a very intelligent man, but sort of wild. He would go through all the drawings and tell us what was good about them, and what was bad. Then I would go to his studio on Saturdays and paint still lifes. That was in 1928 - 29. Soon after I started coming to his studio he moved from Washington Square to Union Square, opposite Kline's. I happened to come when he was getting ready to move, and the hallway was piled high with paintings and beautiful drawings he was throwing out. He was about to put his foot through a beautiful self-portrait - the one we donated to LACMA - but I rescued that and a little a la Cezanne painting. Otherwise he destroyed everything. I paid him whatever I could spare for the paintings. The new studio was great big one. It had once been a dancehall. I worked with him for a while there, but then the depression came, and I had some family problems, and we lost contact for a while in the thirties. I had some family problems, too, but then in 1933, 34, I went back again. And I used to go twice a week in the evening to paint and draw. There I learned what was good and what was bad. That studio was so

spotlessly clean; it was a good example of a spotless studio. But the poor man was so starved, you know. They had no money, nothing. He borrowed paint, you know, from the stores. And I saw his new paintings and said, "My God, that's what I like." He painted beautiful abstract paintings. He was inspired by Picasso, but would always make a Gorky out of it. And then he used to put still lifes up and one evening he said, "Today I'll show you how to paint." He made the whole painting for me. And I kept all these things, I kept all the drawings he worked on for me, while explaining how to draw. Sometimes a drawing was made that I worked on and Gorky worked on, and these I have kept for myself. They could never be sold as Gorky drawings.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It can be sold as a combined effort?

HANS BURKHARDT: Yeah, I guess so. Sometimes when I knew he had no money I wanted to invite him to go out to eat. He never wanted to go out. So I used by buy a big bag of groceries - I used to just put it in the kitchen, and I would say, "Gorky, I brought you something." I believe I was the only man who had a key to his studio, and could come and go as I pleased. In fact, when somebody came he looked through a little hole to see who it was. He didn't want strangers in there, even when he was home.

JEAN-LUC BORDEAUX: Let me ask you a few questions at this point before we go further on that. When you first started to study with Gorky in 1928, were you the only student?

HANS BURKHARDT: No. Ethel Schwabacher was there, and de Kooning used to be there. These were the main people. There were some other students there once in a while.

JEAN-LUC BORDEAUX: Were you on friendly terms with them or were you...?

HANS BURKHARDT: I never saw Schwabacher because she came over during the daytime, but de Kooning and I were there together. We were very bashful and always sat in the corner and Gorky was the great genius. We admired him as our master.

JEAN-LUC BORDEAUX: Do you remember seeing any particular works of art on the walls, illustration, copy, or ...

HANS BURKHARDT: He had a few old masters on the walls. The walls were spotlessly clean. The floor was spotless. There was not a drop of paint on the floor. Where he painted was an old carpet and the paint - I never saw a dirty brush. There was some heavy paint which he used for texture sometimes, but otherwise the studio was so spotless you could eat from the floor. It was washed every Saturday; it was an old floor and the walls were clean. You could see maybe two abstractions on the wall, maybe one painting here and then some old prints on the wall.

PAUL KARLSTROM: How was Gorky supporting himself at this time?

HANS BURKHARDT: Well, he had WPA and he was the foreman, and I think he made $26 there a week and through that particular project he could get some paint, too. So he painted again. He made some enormously big paintings again.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And what were you doing during this time to make money - to make a living?

HANS BURKHARDT: I finished furniture, and I made all the estimates for the big jobs. I was working for Schmieg and Kotzian, a very fine furniture factory.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mrs. Burkhardt, why don't you come over and join us? I'm sure you'll have something to add as we go along.

HANS BURKHARDT: And I was very fortunate. In fact, I started with $15 a week there, and in four years I was foreman and made $80. I was the highest paid man in the shop. $80 a week, and then during the depression it went down to $45.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's still better than some others.

HANS BURKHARDT: Oh, that was lots of money then.

THORDIS BURHARDT: We never had to be in the soup lines (laughter).

HANS BURKHARDT: I came once and Gorky said, "Hans, I need $20 tomorrow otherwise I'm out on the street." I said, "Gorky, you're going to have your $20 tomorrow." And he wanted to give me several paintings and I said, "No, Gorky, I don't want to take advantage of you. One painting is more than enough." So I took one.

JEAN-LUC BORDEAUX: What did you learn, exactly?

HANS BURKHARDT: How to see and think for myself. I worked a la Gorky, a la Picasso, you know. I never knew who Picasso was before. I didn't have an education in art.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So it really came all through Gorky?

HANS BURKHARDT: Through Gorky. He was the one - I saw the abstractions there and I saw what was going on. Burliuk used to come there and the fellow who made the abstract musical things...

THORDIS BURHARDT: Stuart Davis.

HANS BURKHARDT: Stuart Davis used to come there and de Kooning. He was very quiet. He was a house painter; I was a furniture finisher, but Gorky always had faith in de Kooning and me. He said, "These two people I think are going to make it."

JEAN-LUC BORDEAUX: That was in 1935, 36?

HANS BURKHARDT: In the thirties, yeah. And you see, we were both influenced by Gorky, but then I came out here and I got away from Gorky. But de Kooning, all his good things, the greatest things he ever made were influenced by Gorky. But then I used to go there, and then in 1937 I had family trouble, my first wife. Something went wrong there and I don't want to mention it, even, and I came to California.

PAUL KARLSTROM: When was it again that you came to California?

HANS BURKHARDT: In 1937.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What brought you to California?

HANS BURKHARDT: The simple reason that there was no justice in the domestic relations court, and my ex-wife was not normal and I couldn't defend myself. Therefore, I was advised by everyone who came to investigate the case to get out of the state; there was absolutely no justice. So I gave her my house and everything. I signed everything to my daughter, and came out here with very little money.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But what was it specifically that brought you here? You obviously had a choice of a number of places to go and you came to Southern California. Did you know somebody?

HANS BURKHARDT: No, I didn't know anybody. I thought with the movie studios there might be a chance of finding a job as a furniture finisher, or doing scenic work or something. It so happened I came on Sunset Boulevard and there was a cabinet maker who made antique furniture. He saw my work and that I could make Chinese cabinets, so he employed me, and I made fake antiques, which I enjoyed very much. But then the war broke out and I went into a defense plant and then I was drafted in the Army. But I was very fortunate. I was just about 38 years old when I was drafted. I was in Texas at Camp Walters and a law came out that those who were 38 or over could be released to go back to the defense plants. And I was really fortunate. I put an application in right away and the same day I got discharged from the Army I got papers to go to the South Pacific. I couldn't see myself going off and kill people; it's just not in me, you know. So anyhow, I came back to my defense plant.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Where did you work? You actually worked at the defense plant?

HANS BURKHARDT: I made airplane parts and I was in charge of the department that cleaned the parts.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Where was that?

HANS BURKHARDT: In Culver City.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What was the firm?

HANS BURKHARDT: I don't remember the name. It was an aircraft corporation - a machine shop. It make parts for airplanes. But I got ill from the fumes and had to quit. Then I had a chance to work in the studios as a furniture finisher. I was there for a couple weeks, then they had a studio strike.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Which studio was that?

HANS BURKHARDT: I worked at MGM, but all the studios were struck. The carpenters, the painters couldn't agree. I was at MGM at that time and it was a ridiculous strike. Two unions fighting each other over things which should have been settled right on the table there. But it so happened it never got settled until most everybody - all the people in the studios were broke.

JEAN-LUC BORDEAUX: Tell me something. It took quite a long time for you to go back to painting. You said that

you had left New York in 1937 and came to California, and then you said the war broke out. Still it's rather surprising that the first thought you had was to go back to furniture or I mean some kind of a craft. Didn't you believe in Gorky's teaching? Didn't you believe in yourself sufficiently?

THORDIS BURHARDT: He had to pay child support. He couldn't afford just to ...

HANS BURKHARDT: There was no chance of teaching whatsoever. I never had a college education. I was just a painter. And I never believed that I could teach.

JEAN-LUC BORDEAUX: Yes, but it seems just on your own terms, didn't you try to experiment or explore further?

HANS BURKHARDT: Oh, I painted all the time.

JEAN-LUC BORDEAUX: Oh, you painted all the time; that's what I wanted to know.

HANS BURKHARDT: I painted some California landscapes and then I painted - I used to work in the defense plant 12 hours a day. I came home at 8 o'clock and I usually painted until 12 o'clock. Whenever something important happened, I made a painting.

JEAN-LUC BORDEAUX: What kind of paintings were you making at that time?

HANS BURKHARDT: The anti-war paintings. The paintings against the concentration camps. There are paintings when we went - invasion - I made a painting that same might, the father and mother praying for the son who gave his life, so I kept on painting all along. And later on the liberation of Paris.

JEAN-LUC BORDEAUX: Are those paintings still...

HANS BURKHARDT: They're mostly here; they never were for sale. Except the County Museum bought one, and a young girl had to have one. And then some are hanging in the Oviatt Library at Northridge.

JEAN-LUC BORDEAUX: So those paintings were done in the early forties.

HANS BURKHARDT: In the early forties. And then after the war, I made paintings of love, the feeling that we all should live together. The dream of one world and so on, and then...

JEAN-LUC BORDEAUX: Did you keep in touch ever with Gorky from California?

HANS BURKHARDT: Gorky never wrote a letter; never answered a letter.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's too bad.

HANS BURKHARDT: It's too bad. He was once out here and didn't look me up. I didn't have a chance to go to New York either because if I would have gone there, my ex-wife would have made trouble for me, so I never had a chance to see him. Well, anyhow, in 1948, I started my own furniture business and I had so much work, within two years I made enough money, I said to hell with the furniture business. I had two years of GI Bill benefits coming, and I took the GI Bill and went to Mexico to paint for two years. And there I really made a big step ahead because Mexico is an interesting place, especially in that period, and I had nothing to do but paint. Now it's different, but in that period you went into graveyards with bones lying around, you know. The people were still revolutionary. It was very interesting - and we used to go to the morgue. We used to draw from the dead bodies, from the graveyards and the celebrations. It was an interesting time to paint. And I did some very, very interesting paintings in Mexico, body and soul paintings. I didn't want to paint the churches the way they were. I created my own churches in their style. And the main thing in Mexico is the journey into the better world, because you see, life doesn't mean anything here. So I painted the journey into the better world and I made some very interesting paintings. They are so poor and suffer so much, they only look forward to the next life in the here-after.

JEAN-LUC BORDEAUX: During this period, I mean following the forties, '45, '46, '47, were you ever in contact with some of the artists, either directly with their works here in Los Angeles or were you interested in keeping in touch with what was happening in New York or elsewhere in the world?

HANS BURKHARDT: Well, I saw de Kooning and I saw what was going on in New York in the fifties, but out here, it was Feitelsen who always promoted the more modern painters, and I was one of the few who painted abstract. Everybody was more conservative. I didn't belong here in the fifties because most everybody painted realism.

THORDIS BURHARDT: In the fifties you were being accepted. You received several prizes...

HANS BURKHARDT: ...oh yes, I got into shows, but the painters out here were mostly conservative.

JEAN-LUC BORDEAUX: But the major figure here in Los Angeles was Feitelsen.

HANS BURKHARDT: Yes. Feitelsen was the one who supported the more modern painters for many years. He was responsible for my first one-man show in 1939.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Where was this show?

HANS BURKHARDT: At the Stendahl Gallery. That was my first show out here.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And was it well received?

HANS BURKHARDT: Well, it was during the depression. It was still hard. 1939, the people had no money, you know. The war was coming on and you made $20, $25 a week, so you see - I sold one painting to a man back East...

THORDIS BURHARDT: ...in Chicago.

HANS BURKHARDT: Do you remember the name? He is one of the big collectors today. That was the first painting he ever bought and he's still got it.

THORDIS BURHARDT: Roy Friedman.

JEAN-LUC BORDEAUX: You mean the Block Collection? In Chicago?

HANS BURKHARDT: No. It was big collector and that was the first painting he ever bought in his life. It was a beautiful little abstract.

JEAN-LUC BORDEAUX: We are now in the early fifties, right?

HANS BURKHARDT: Yeah.

JEAN-LUC BORDEAUX: We have reached the fifties. You have come in contact with Feitelsen. You came back from Mexico after spending two or three years, you say?

HANS BURKHARDT: I met Feitelsen in about 1938, '39.

JEAN-LUC BORDEAUX: Oh. You met him that early?

HANS BURKHARDT: That early, yes.

JEAN-LUC BORDEAUX: Oh, I see. That's something we have missed.

HANS BURKHARDT: I met him that early, and he liked my work right away.

PAUL KARLSTROM: This is one of the things that I'm very interested in, your relationships with artists in this area. Feitelsen now was one of them. It turns out you met him early on, and then the nature of the relationship. Was it something where you would visit one another regularly and sort of critique some work, exchange ideas, something like that?

HANS BURKHARDT: Well, yes, because he invited me for shows. For example, he was more or less working with the Art Association; they gave me a show there.

THORDIS BURHARDT: Well, we had social contact with them also. They would have dinner with us, and we would have dinner with them.

HANS BURKHARDT: Yeah, we saw them all the time, you know. We worked for certain exhibitions. There were group exhibitions, and Feitelsen was always a good organizer. If anybody has anything to say about Feitelsen, he did more for modern art in this town up to a certain period than anybody else.

JEAN-LUC BORDEAUX: When did you start to shape up your art or your style, if I may use that expression? You had left - I'm trying to establish a connection in this case between again your background in New York and what you have done in the early fifties. After 1940, if I remember correctly, Gorky moved into a couple of different periods.

HANS BURKHARDT: Gorky died in 1948, and Gorky painted a certain thing. You know what changed my thinking...

JEAN-LUC BORDEAUX: You spent so much time, so many years with Gorky, I would assume that you have kept

some of his teaching, whatever it is, and since Gorky had different periods, I would just be happy to see if you have, for some reason, kept some of his creative processes or whatever, some of his mannerisms or his surrealistic type of ...

HANS BURKHARDT: Yes. Gorky said that in order to paint, you've got to draw more than ten years because painting is not more than drawing with paint. All my paintings come from sketches. When something happened, I made a painting. If nothing happens, you just don't make anything. In Mexico, a lot of things happened and that was exciting. And then came the Korean war and I made a few paintings about that. And then after that, I made peaceful paintings again. In 1945 I made The Dream of One World. I took the white race, the yellow race, the black race, and the new child is born - the first child in the world mixed of all the races, my dream that we all should live together.

JEAN-LUC BORDEAUX: Have you ever met any Mexican artists?

HANS BURKHARDT: I met Siqueiros. I met Siqueiros when he made the murals in Mexico City in 1950, and he had just gotten the Prix de Rome that year. I spoke to him; he was a very nice person.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Were you staying in Mexico City when you were in Mexico?

HANS BURKHARDT: No, I was mostly in Guadalajara, or Zapoppan, a little town nearby, then in Guadalajara. I lived with Mexican students and we used to go to the morgue, and things like that. They used to take us to places.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, what about - you must have then come into contact - you mentioned one example with the Mexican muralists working in the monumental manner, covering great, great surfaces. Did their style - did you respond to their style at all, to working on the grand scale? Was this attractive to you?

HANS BURKHARDT: No, you can make a small painting, and it looks big, you know. It's not necessary to make a big thing; it can be small.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Stylistically, was there anything in any of them - the great Mexican figures?

JEAN-LUC BORDEAUX: The type of impending tragedy which is always present?

HANS BURKHARDT: Yeah, I think more like the old school - the tragedy of Mexico, you know, the graveyards, they lie around, you know, and the sad things. I felt the same way as those people because it was the time. It was just the right time.

THORDIS BURHARDT: But it was the idea more. You weren't stylistically affected by it.

HANS BURKHARDT: No. Style was - they are always more into making it the way they think realistically, and I make mine more on the surrealistic side or abstract. I went further, for example, when I made a cathedral I took their architecture and made it from my own drawings into my own architecture.

THORDIS BURHARDT: Well, you were trying to present the soul of Mexico instead of the ...

HANS BURKHARDT: And then people say "he paints burials." A burial is a journey into the better world in Mexico. It's nothing sad. When you see a child burial, to them the child has become an angel, so you make something beautiful - the feeling that - the change from the earthly shape into the soul. So you paint the soul going to heaven.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You know, I'm going to interject something here because in talking with Jean-Luc and looking at some of your work and, I must confess, I haven't seen a great deal, then just in talking with you, I see some - surprisingly enough in some ways - parallel between some of your concerns and experiences and those of Rico Lebron. Later Rico went to Mexico and (I didn't talk with him but I talked with his widow, and she was along with him) was attracted to some of the very same qualities in Mexico. And his wife expressed his interest very much in the same way. He used to go watch animals being slaughtered, for instance, not because he liked to see it.

HANS BURKHARDT: I knew him. He was a friend of mine and he went to the same place, San Miguel. I saw the same things that Rico did.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But he was there a little later than you were.

HANS BURKHARDT: Yes, I was there earlier.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But you say you did know him here in Los Angeles?

HANS BURKHARDT: Oh, yes; he was a wonderful person.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, I would like to hear about how you met him. He, of course, is known as a more traditional artist in many ways, representational and so forth. What affinities did you sense between your ideas and his?

HANS BURKHARDT: Well, like you say, he was more representational. But one thing that I didn't like too much was that he made Buchenwald twenty years after it happened. You see, when I made Buchenwald, I made it exactly when it happened and you have the power and the feeling against what's happening. When you want to make it later, you cannot go back, you know. I made happy children playing in Mexico. I could make them all my life and make good money on it. You make a few paintings and that's it, and then you go further. In 1957, I made a lot of landscapes, desert landscapes, extremely abstract with beautiful colors. I sold everything. I could have kept on, but you make so many, then you see something new again and you change. Like in Mexico I used to collect skulls. But Rico was in Mexico and we were in the same place; we had the same friends. Rico was the best painter here. Of all the painters of California from that period, Rico was the top man.

PAUL KARLSTROM: He believed in drawing for one thing.

HANS BURKHARDT: He was a draftsman, a fine draftsman.

THORDIS BURHARDT: But he was a much better draftsman than he was a painter.

HANS BURKHARDT: He was not a painter. Like Picasso was more of a draftsman and ...

JEAN-LUC BORDEAUX: ...he was well-known also as a teacher, right?

HANS BURKHARDT: Yes.

JEAN-LUC BORDEAUX: He had a workshop?

HANS BURKHARDT: Oh yes, he had a whole school. They all drew like him. He was maybe too influential, perhaps, that things had to be done his way.

THORDIS BURHARDT: Well, they became very devoted to him.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, how did you meet him because I gather that you did have a fairly close contact with him?

HANS BURKHARDT: We had meetings. We were the first ones to get the group together for, let me see, to unite the artists in the whole country. What group was that again?

THORDIS BURHARDT: Artists Equity.

HANS BURKHARDT: Artists Equity. We had the first meetings together.

THORDIS BURHARDT: There were various artists groups during those day.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, I'd be very interested in that too.

THORDIS BURHARDT: But they petered out.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Were they formal gatherings of artists for some particular purpose or are you talking about an informal grouping where artists would get together socially, to discuss shared interests, but not to promote something?

HANS BURKHARDT: Not too much. It's very strange. The artists here stayed apart somehow. But there were art lectures all the time, and the Art Association was very active then.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah. So not so much a sense of community.

HANS BURKHARDT: Which is a sad thing.

THORDIS BURHARDT: Nothing like in New York.

HANS BURKHARDT: For example, I have a friend, Irving Block, who was of the WPA in New York. And he's out here; he's teaching now at Northridge. And we have gone for the last 17 years, every Wednesday night to life class. We still hold together. We look at each other's work and criticize things. He's about the closest friend I have. I wish there would be more artists...

PAUL KARLSTROM: Are you still doing this?

HANS BURKHARDT: Yes, we've been doing it every week. I've got thousands of pastels.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, why is this? This is actually one of the complaints about the Los Angeles art scene - that there really isn't a closely knit community. You have now a group in Venice of young kids and so forth but basically, I gather there never has been say artists getting together at the usual bar, like at the Cedar Bar in New York or something like that, where the artists would know one another and they would talk about the other man's work and maybe be insulted or maybe praise it, but not out here.

THORDIS BURHARDT: There was a lot more of that in the fifties and early sixties.

HANS BURKHARDT: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, where would the artists gather?

THORDIS BURHARDT: Well, when la Cienega was very much alive we used to meet down there and we'd meet other artists, and then we'd go out after the galleries closed and there'd be a great deal of discussion and talking.

JEAN-LUC BORDEAUX: You mean when the galleries were open on Monday night?

HANS BURKHARDT: Monday night, when you met all the artists.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So that Monday really did function as a focal point?

THORDIS BURHARDT: Yes, it did, for many years.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But there's nothing like that now anymore?

HANS BURKHARDT: For a while there was a group around Rico Lebrun and everything was that group, and they painted like him; he was the master and they got together and painted certain things. Before that Emil Kosa and Millard Sheets and the conservative painters, controlled it for a long time.

THORDIS BURHARDT: Well, they controlled it before Rico Lebron. He came after them.

HANS BURKHARDT: Yes. But you see there was always a group of artists who stuck together, and everybody followed that school because if you wanted to get in a museum show when Emil Kosa and Millard Sheets were on top, you had no chance to get in unless you painted in their style.

THORDIS BURHARDT: But that didn't last very long.

HANS BURKHARDT: No, but then Rico - if it didn't look like Rico Lebrun you were out of luck - so everybody painted like Rico Lebrun to get in the museum show. You really had only a few painters out here who painted on their own. There was a good one, Fred Kann, who was a great painter.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I don't think I know him.

HANS BURKHARDT: Fred Kann, he passed away ten years ago and he studied in Paris and he made hard edge paintings in Paris in 1933. He made some excellent paintings, but he never was too much appreciated. He was more appreciated as a teacher. He had the Art Institute. We have three of his paintings, good ones, too, and one of his sculptures.

PAUL KARLSTROM: He was teaching where?

THORDIS BURHARDT: At the Kann Art Institute, his own school. And he was a wonderful person.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Is that where Stanton Macdonald-Wright taught for a while? This was back some time ago.

HANS BURKHARDT: I don't know, did he? I mean, Stanton is a friend of mine, too. We knew each other for many, many years.

THORDIS BURHARDT: Did he teach somewhere else before he went to UCLA?

HANS BURKHARDT: I think he ended up at UCLA.

PAUL KARLSTROM: No, excuse me, they had something called the Los Angeles Art Students League which was patterned after New York, so it wasn't the Art Institute. I apologize; I was mistaken.

HANS BURKHARDT: We always got along well together. And so I met those people, you know, Fred Kann, Macdonald-Wright.

THORDIS BURHARDT: But through the years we've often had young artists come here to look at your paintings and discuss art. There's always been some contact.

PAUL KARLSTROM: When did you start teaching art?

HANS BURKHARDT: In 1958. They called and asked if I wanted to take the summer class in Long Beach. I said no because I never had a college education and I didn't think I could make it. I was busy anyhow. Then my wife came home, I told her and she said she'd change my mind. She called them up and asked if the job was still open. They said yes and then I started to teach there and I had a wonderful time.

THORDIS BURHARDT: At times I've changed my husband's mind (laughter). He was complaining for years that he couldn't ever get a job teaching and there he had an offer and turned it down.

HANS BURKHARDT: She's helped me with certain things. And then I went to New York to visit my daughter, and I got a telephone call from USC, asking if I would like to take the job of Frances De Erdely for a year, because he was ill. He recommended me. So I taught there for one year.

PAUL KARLSTROM: When was this?

HANS BURKHARDT: In 59, 60.

THORDIS BURHARDT: And then he had a couple of evening classes, extension.

JEAN-LUC BORDEAUX: Drawing or painting?

HANS BURKHARDT: Drawing and painting.

THORDIS BURHARDT: He was a full professor there. And then he had some evening classes at UCLA, and then he had one in Laguna Beach, Chouinard and Palos Verdes.

HANS BURKHARDT: Chouinard, Saturdays. Summer classes at Otis.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Really then from 1959 until last year, you've been painting - or teaching somewhere.

HANS BURKHARDT: Yes. Nine years at Northridge.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So that really was by far the longest stint then.

HANS BURKHARDT: And I still go there every Monday, I have a lab. And I enjoy it every time I go there. I must say I've had a very good life and I enjoyed teaching very much. It made me really happy. You have your ups and downs, but in general, when you have a good relationship with your students and they learn something, there's a certain amount of prestige, because the students love me and they still come to see me, and they produce good things. But I show slides from Mexico, and teach them how to see - how to be abstract. As long as it's done well, each one will do it in his own way, like handwriting, and they make beautiful drawings.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Let me ask you this: your most important teacher obviously was Gorky.

HANS BURKHARDT: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did you consciously attempt to pattern your approach to teaching after the example of Gorky?

HANS BURKHARDT: Yes, more or less. You see, my class was always quiet. You didn't hear much talking. I went from person to person and corrected. If I could see a fellow was focusing on something, I'd tell him to keep on going because he was searching for something. Then, I helped the ones that needed it the most, you see, and I'd show them how to space things and if they wanted to be a sculptor, I'd teach them how to see like a sculptor would see. Or if they wanted to make an abstraction, I'd teach them how to make it abstract. I'd show them, for example, a slide from a city and the shadow itself - what a beautiful piece of sculpture the shadow of that made. Or I'd show them a little grave from a child in Mexico and I'd say, "Let's make a peace poster." There was one board from a coffin with a couple of artificial flowers. Then you see this horrible skeleton, and I'd say, "Let's make an anti-war poster." So I gave them the idea that each one has to learn how to see and think for himself. And I gave them the freedom to do it the way they wanted to, the way they could do it best. And I succeeded very well. In painting, I had a lot of still lifes on the wall, some extremely abstract, and some which a conservative man could paint - only to start, and then it was up to them to make a creation out of it. And they

never could make a painting without making a sketch first because a pencil drawing is the blueprint to everything. Then you can change after.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And that's a Gorky idea.

HANS BURKHARDT: It's a Gorky idea that you make a blueprint which is the sketch and then when you paint, it becomes a painting. That's the Gorky idea and I still believe in it. All of my paintings are made from sketches. When I go out now, and see something interesting, I make a little sketch. I may make the most beautiful, most interesting type of work in my paintings. But if nothing happens and I just make another painting, it doesn't mean anything. Something has to happen. Like that big anti-war painting with the fifteen skulls. It took me twenty years to collect the skulls. People ask how long it took me to make the painting? It took me twenty years to get the skulls and I finally made the painting then which was My Lai. You see when My Lai happened, I got so darned mad, I said, "Now I know what to do with those skulls," and I put fifteen in the big painting.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You know, I think this leads us naturally into the question we were discussing on the way over, Jean-Luc and I, about your working methodology and the question of how you grasp an image or how you create an image, if there's a preconception, if you really start from an idea or from an emotion, or if you work in a more random way, perhaps in a surrealist, automatic way. Say you've got an empty canvas; this is the best way to pose the question. What from there?

HANS BURKHARDT: It's really shocking when you see an empty canvas. (laughter)

THORDIS BURHARDT: May I say something here? Many, many years ago, before I even knew him, a group of artists were written up in a magazine called the "California Artists" and he there said that his ideas came to him like in a dream, and I think this is true. The ideas come; he doesn't know just where they come from, but he has an emotion, and then the picture sort of evolves out of this emotion.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, what would be the process then, the inspiration or the dream which brings something into focus and directs your thinking in one way to the realization of an image?

HANS BURKHARDT: Well, I find an image. For example, once I was sitting on a tombstone in the graveyard in Guadalajara, watching a burial. I was thinking that this was the end of someone's life. Then a seedpod fell from a jacaranda tree. I opened it and saw the most beautiful seeds, a new life, and this inspired me to do a painting called The Beginning and the End.

JEAN-LUC BORDEAUX: Were you affected by the structure, by the design?

HANS BURKHARDT: In a way. I made a painting called Entrance into Mexico. My friend, who was down there, asked where I found the gate, because he couldn't fine it anywhere. Well, it was not a real gate, but when you look at a burial scene from behind, when they carry the coffin, it looks like a structure, the coffin on top, and the pall bearers below, makes the structure which I made into Entrance into Mexico. So whenever something happens, like I see the dirty politicians, and I put them behind bars, in a painting, in jail, where they rot. I make the beautiful things in Mexico, the journeys into the unknown, in beautiful colors, taken from the flowers in the graveyard. In my paintings, which started from the scull, I made them into beautiful shapes and colors, and they became a series called Journey into the Unknown.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, it seems to me, at least to a certain extent, your work is a realization of certain fantasies, a working out of fantasies, especially when you say you get really angry, say about a political event or a battle. It's almost like a sublimation. It's a way to vent anger or whatever the emotion might be. So you're really an emotional painter.

HANS BURKHARDT: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: There's no question about it. An expressionist, if I might use the term.

HANS BURKHARDT: Yes, more or less. I don't classify myself in any style. I just paint whatever happens. I just finished a big painting. When we were in Switzerland, we took the stone roof off my sister's place which was 300 years old and everything was made with beams and wooden pegs. I've got 16 pegs here about 300 years old, and I finally got the use of them. I used them in a big painting. I glued my burlap on and made my design and then I screwed them on from the back, those things sticking out like thorns. It's the feeling of my last painting which shows that an artist is never finished. But you see without those pegs, I never could have made that painting. Something has to happen. I made a few paintings; they're just other paintings. It doesn't mean anything. If a friend dies, for example, when Kennedy died, I made him going to heaven, a journey from here to the better world. Johnson I buried a most horrible way because of the war. It is wrong that one man has the right to send a half a million men over there, and I buried Johnson; I buried Nixon, too, in a painting.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That was very prophetic.

HANS BURKHARDT: I would like to make a painting - the beautiful America. I have been thinking a long time already of making a big painting, but nothing happened yet to make it that beautiful. Something has to happen in order to make that painting to show that America is the best country in the world, and it's a great country where you have opportunities.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you have - obviously the sentiment is there; your feelings are there waiting again to escape or to be realized within their proper vehicle, but what you need is some vehicle to express it.

HANS BURKHARDT: Something beautiful has to happen.

PAUL KARLSTROM: An event, then really is what you're saying.

HANS BURKHARDT: An event, you see. So you can paint the painting at a certain time.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's interesting. So these statements are really tied to specific events.

HANS BURKHARDT: All my paintings are more or less typical American paintings because it's my life the way I led it in America. I show the sad things - I revolted against strikes; I say they should be settled at the table; and I revolted against lynching; I said the courts should decide if a man is guilty or not - not the people. There shouldn't be any lynching. I painted Reagan as a studio scab because he went through the picket line with his actors. I still have the painting. I made the dream of beauty that we all should live together; I made lovers. I made many beautiful lovers which were at that time too modern. Today, they're old fashioned. But the feeling that two forms are together loving each other. It doesn't have to be human beings. I made a painting, "The Love of Two Nails," on a moonlit night under the lantern. I found two rusty nails lying on the ground and this gave me the idea to make a painting, a beautiful painting. I saw them there on the floor and I said, look how beautifully they live together.

JEAN-LUC BORDEAUX: This is where Hans, I feel, I see links between some kind of figurative or abstract configuration and some kind of surrealistic approach where the thing becomes a symbol.

THORDIS BURHARDT: You know, everything is alive; the nails are alive. They are constantly moving. They aren't just two dead things lying there.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But making love?

HANS BURKHARDT: Well, it's a feeling that they belong together.

JEAN-LUC BORDEAUX: It's a bymbol.

HANS BURKHARDT: You see, for example, the painting Hirshhorn bought called Sunrise. It's taken from a pile of ashes where somebody burned some wires, from barrels, and the wires were lying there. A piece of charred wood was there yet, and some of those nails, and this was the design for the sunrise. I just found something in nature. Everybody looks - I learned from Gorky to look in a little corner and find something, not to look at the whole thing. You look in the little corner and find something like somebody burned some barrels and crates and it was lying there in the ashes. One friend painted the whole Los Angeles scenery; another one painted the railroads, and I took those nails and those ashes and made the most beautiful designs. And then I made a sunrise out of it, or the crucifixion.

JEAN-LUC BORDEAUX: Let me ask you a few questions now. Since I know a bit of the entire production, you're quite a prolific artist. It's absolutely amazing. I was always amazed by the number of paintings and drawings and pastels. As far as your career is concerned, and it's not finished obviously, but it can be divided into several periods. There is one prodigal moment where you seemed to abandon the well-rounded, properly designed and properly painted type of painting. In other words, it was up to the fifties I think that you kept up with the aesthetics of the Twentieth Century, and I would say with the aesthetics of European art in general. Then you moved into something which is very interesting. You start to scar the canvas; you start to build up the paint into mounds of paint, even sometimes you are going to add fragments, man-made objects here and there. At what particular time did you start to do that and for what reason if you can pinpoint some reason, or was it just simply because it was part of a new tendency of yours, or just because you happened to see something which attracted you ...

HANS BURKHARDT: No, it just so happened that I got the material - I used to work in the studios as a scenic artist and I used to work in television as a scenic artist. We had those dirty buckets of plastic paint there standing around with thick skin on them, especially when I made the anti-war paintings, I went over there and picked those things up, those heavy skins, and my canvases always started with raw linen. I glue-sized my

canvas, then I poured will-hold glue on it and put those patches on it. Then the empty canvas was covered with white lead paste. I lay it out first; I make my drawing, then I tear the plastic material and lay it down and some places it's two inches thick.

THORDIS BURHARDT: But do you mean the only reason why you did that was because the material was there?

HANS BURKHARDT: Because I wanted certain textures.

THORDIS BURHARDT: I mean, you wanted to do these things and you found the materials.

HANS BURKHARDT: I found the material for what I wanted to do as an anti-war gesture. Ugly paint, thick, gruesome.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Also, there was a stylistic change, then, I gather, this shift was really a direct response to events again.

HANS BURKHARDT: In this case yes. But still, it cannot be explained just simply in terms of events because why, then, should I feel the same way just after the second world war, for instance, which was probably as dramatic and tragic as what happened during the fifties.

JEAN-LUC BORDEAUX: I'm just trying to find why we suddenly find assemblage or the fact the Hans felt very much, well, I would call that the necessity. For instance, those elements which look like scars - not just in a negative sense but also in a very positive relief sense. You can touch; you can feel. And sometimes you go even as far as placing the real deadly object, like a scythe, for instance, you know, or the real steel blade of a tool which is really incorporate directly with the canvas. That came at a very, very specific moment in your life. I wonder when...

HANS BURKHARDT: It came at a moment when I found those things, those objects, like the heavy thick paint. I didn't see anybody using that and I don't think anybody ever did.

THORDIS BURHARDT: But if you had found those objects ten years ago, you would never have thought of using them, or twenty years ago.

HANS BURKHARDT: No, it took me fifteen years before I knew how to use the skulls.

THORDIS BURHARDT: But the thing is, Hans, that there were conditions in the world at that time that made you want to protest.

HANS BURKHARDT: Yes.

THORDIS BURHARDT: And the conditions were such that you felt that you had to make ugly things.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, why not paint ugly things? Why use these materials? It seems like a very radical jump. I think this is what you're getting at.

HANS BURKHARDT: You see, I am against war all the time. I say war - I don't care what side you are on - should be settled before it starts, where it is settled in the end, in negotiation. Now, as to the thick paint skin, if I hadn't worked at NBC, I would never have made that big painting as it is, because I wouldn't have had the material which was what I needed to make the ugliness of Watergate, the ugliness of war, they were made that way. They are shocking, and the paint on some of them is two inches thick. But it has to be plastic paint, because the oil paint would never dry.

THORDIS BURHARDT: Well, in one of the catalogs, he speaks about the need for different interiors and different modes of expression to present his different emotional reactions to things.

HANS BURKHARDT: For example, I went in the studio once and I found two old buckets there with about two inches of thick skin on them and I picked one out like that with a stick in the middle, made a hole in it and put it in the other bucket - they have two pieces - I made a painting of lung cancer out of these because it was just the right, the most ugly looking thing you have ever seen. It's against smoking; I made paintings against smoking. And this I could use for lung cancer because when you look at that, people drop a cigarette right away and don't want to smoke anymore.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It doesn't always work but that's the way you were hoping it would work.

HANS BURKHARDT: Anyhow, we were in Switzerland for a year in 1964-1965. I wanted to meet Mark Tobey and someone told me Tobey didn't want to see anybody. That's why I didn't see him in 64 or 65. So I went there again in '66.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did you know Tobey before then?

HANS BURKHARDT: No.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You just wanted to meet him, then?

HANS BURKHARDT: Yes, I wanted to meet him. Anyhow, I went there the next year and I met Tobey. I bought a few things, and then I said to him that I had friends who would like to have some of his things. Then, for several years, I kept buying things for myself, and sold many things for him over here to our friends. And from that time on, whenever I went over there I was invited to his house, and we went out together; we had a good relationship and that's how I bought my Tobey's.

JEAN-LUC BORDEAUX: Why was it so important for you to meet Tobey?

HANS BURKHARDT: Because Tobey was one of the modern painters when I painted modern in that group in the late forties and fifties. I was very much interested in Tobey all the time because he was one of my favorite artists.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Why? Stylistic?

HANS BURKHARDT: Because he has something which others haven't got. For example, he put American art with art from the Orient and made a culture out of it, which is Tobey's own. He's a beautiful man. And I'm the only person he took into his secret place. He gave me things which he gave to no one else.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, you had no personal contact with Tobey before this time you mentioned. I forget the date.

HANS BURKHARDT: In 1966.

PAUL KARLSTROM: In 1966. So you had no correspondence; you had never written to him. You just emerged upon the scene in Switzerland and tried to see him?

HANS BURKHARDT: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And then how did you finally get to see him?

HANS BURKHARDT: I called him up...

THORDIS BURHARDT: Well, there was a friend...

HANS BURKHARDT: ...and a friend of mine made the arrangements and took me there, but a gallery woman didn't want me to meet him because she was afraid I would buy something directly, and wanted to sell it to me, so she could get the commission. (laughter)

PAUL KARLSTROM: Who's the gallery person?

HANS BURKHARDT: What was the name of that woman? Thomas?

THORDIS BURHARDT: Tomar? No, not quite. Something like that. Betty Toman

HANS BURKHARDT: Betty Toman.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Was she American?

THORDIS BURHARDT: No, she was Swiss.

HANS BURKHARDT: But the last time I was over there, since he had the operation last year, the studio was so cluttered with everything, he wouldn't let anybody go in his studio. You've never seen such a mess in your whole life, and I'm the only person who could go in there and clean it. And I cleaned it perfectly; he was very happy. He had things on the piano for ten years lying there. He thought he had lost everything and it was lying right there. I found some beautiful paintings, things on the floor mixed in with all kinds of junk - some of the most beautiful little paintings. So I made order again and he was very happy with it. He doesn't write very often because he's too old and has too little energy. What he has must be used for his art. But we have gotten many letters from him during the years.

JEAN-LUC BORDEAUX: There is a question again I would like to ask you. From the outsider's point of view, for instance, you learned to discover some of the affinities between your work and that of other artists. I know that some critics have tried to establish some rapport, I mean stylistic relationship between some of your most

disturbing paintings (especially when you start slashing the canvas with paint and things like this) and people like de Kooning, for instance. I'm talking about the black nudes and the black series, those large female nudes which are really quite strong and powerful.

PAUL KARLSTROM: When were they done?

JEAN-LUC BORDEAUX: Oh, they were done in the fifties, and also in the early sixties. Some people mentioned - I don't know if they mentioned it by writing or I simply heard it by hearsay, that it's possible to see some affinity between you and some of the CoBrA painters. The CoBrA painters, if you remember, are those Belgian people like Appel and those people who just really build up a little bit like you do, but the main difference I think is that always under any type of substance, any type of design or configuration, you always have a fabulous sense of composition. When you look at a painting by Appel, for instance, it's always a rather at random type of thing. It's really just haphazard. Again, the question is, have you ever been self-conscious of those developments in Europe? Do you yourself really keep in touch with developments in the art world or do you try to just isolate yourself to a point that you just sustain your own creativity by your own emotion, period.

HANS BURKHARDT: That's the only way. You see, de Kooning and I learned how to draw from Gorky. We knew how to put paint on, and I had the same education de Kooning had, how to paint sloppy, when to paint with full brush. We learned that from Gorky. Gorky was a genius in painting. He could take a brush with thick paint and really paint. We did the same...

JEAN-LUC BORDEAUX: ...what about the de Kooning distortions, for instance, what do you think? Do you think they are just simply...?

HANS BURKHARDT: I think they are his way of expressing his feelings.

THORDIS BURHARDT: But the reason for Hans' always having good composition, I think, is because before he paints he spends probably months preparing by making a lot of drawings.

JEAN-LUC BORDEAUX: Yes, the element of structure and design is very strong in Hans.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Even for the most non-objective works?

HANS BURKHARDT: Yeah, they all come from real life. And just little by little, they become that way.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you're drawing from life - something you saw that would be figurative, representational. And then another drawing, and another drawing, and in each case, abstracting elements within the drawing from nature.

HANS BURKHARDT: Until it becomes my own world.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, until you've created really an entirely non-objective picture or drawing, and then you decide at some point that this is really for the canvas.

HANS BURKHARDT: Everything comes from nature, and I make it my own world. But if certain things happen, you see, then I get excited. It can be something beautiful I see. I saw the same place where Munch made his beautiful sunsets; we were in the same place and I made several paintings on the same sunset, but it became my type of sunset. So I see things - like Munch painted certain things, I made some paintings from the same place, but they became altogether different. I make figures which are from my own world. They are all taken from life, and then abstracted as much as I want to go.

JEAN-LUC BORDEAUX: Again, that's part of this type of investigation we're trying to put together. Jackson Pollock was very active in the forties, for instance, and when we were talking about those very energetic brush strokes, criss-crossing the canvas, what was your reaction, for instance, to those action paintings? Did they have any type of impact on your style? Did you react against them? Or did you like them?

HANS BURKHARDT: Well, I still went in my own way. Naturally, you become more loose. Those big paintings they made, they were in a certain group and I couldn't make paintings that big even if I wanted to because I had no room. I didn't belong to the group. But the method was a la Gorky. Gorky started what the New York school did. I worked in the studio and saw all these things. Gorky worked a long time on those things already. He made some spatter and then he threw it away again. He threw most of his things away. I saw him make the big things like Franz Kline. You know, Gorky was actually the innovator of the whole school. You see, Gorky was the most important man in my life. He taught me how to see and to think. He would say, "You are in the middle of the ocean; you have to find your own beach."

JEAN-LUC BORDEAUX: You sound also as if he were the most important man in New York at the time, which is not recognized by everyone, which I think has been neglected.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But he's always mentioned, not necessarily as the crucial figure, but pretty crucial.

JEAN-LUC BORDEAUX: One of the reasons which I think has not been established yet actually is that Gorky's drawings are probably much more important than his paintings. His method of working through his drawings is actually quite, not really revolutionary maybe, but I mean he was far ahead of his time.

HANS BURKHARDT: But he was the beginning of that particular school which says to hell with you old people; we're going to paint the way we want to. We use brush strokes; we use spatter; we paint free. And we don't want to go along - because there used to be a group of painters in New York in the thirties which were very conservative. They were all realistic painters and painted, you know, portraits and nudes - nicely painted, but Gorky was the one who was interested in Picasso, Braque, and what was going on in the rest of the world. But he learned from them and then finally made his own Gorky's. But when you look at a Gorky, it always has a certain finesse; it has a certain knowledge; it has a certain stroke behind it of a genius.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What about surrealism? You know, Gorky is associated with aspects of surrealism. Did he talk to you when you were in the studio, when you and de Kooning were students, about surrealism, the interesting ideas, automatism, this type of thing?

HANS BURKHARDT: He worked on everything. He said to look in the little corner and find something and he made some surrealistic shapes. He made those shapes little by little. For example, he showed me the female part of woman, and in many of his later shapes you can find the same stroke. You can find certain lines which are exactly Gorky, which he found in nature and then changed into a dream. He went on the farm, and looked at a little piece of grass. He found a grasshopper. You find grasshoppers in his paintings. You find a snail; you find a duck; you find a chicken. Then he made them into surrealism, which was really beautiful.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But what about in talking with his students and, of course, I mean you in particular, did he talk about the intellectual or the philosophical notions of surrealism, the surrealist movement? Was he interested in this or did he convey an interest in this to you as students?

HANS BURKHARDT: Well, when I was there, he was more a la Picasso. The surrealism came only later when Breton came there, you see, and he influenced him in that way.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, that's right. When was that?

HANS BURKHARDT: In the forties.

JEAN-LUC BORDEAUX: Yeah, because actually they all left Europe either in the end of 1939 or the beginning of 40 or even 41 to escape from the invasion of Germany.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, that's true, because you were with Gorky quite a bit before then.

HANS BURKHARDT: When I was there from 1934 to 37, he was influenced by Miro, Picasso and Braque. Those were his influences. And then, later on, when Breton came over, he was more interested in surrealism.

JEAN-LUC BORDEAUX: Especially when Matta arrived, the Chilean artist. He had a great influence on him.

HANS BURKHARDT: He worked on everything possible to experiment, and I remember when he made the murals for the New York Airport, he used, for example, photographs of motors which were cut apart. He made the rudder with the American flag. He made the Texaco station with the Texaco star and a pump in the abstract and made the star red. (They destroyed his mural because they said the red start was communistic.) Texaco still has the big star and we still have our stars in our flag.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Sounds like Diego Rivera.

HANS BURKHARDT: See, they destroyed all those murals. They could have been taken off the wall; they were painted on canvas and they could've easily kept them. I was there when he made those sketches, and could have gotten some, but I was always bashful. So was de Kooning. We never dared ask for them, but sometimes I picked things up. I'd find a whole pile outside. I'd pick things up. I said, "Look, why do you throw all these beautiful things out?" "Well," he says, "I cannot sell them anyhow." He threw so much out; beautiful paintings, just tore them apart. Drawings by the barrels.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's interesting. So he really - was it a storage problem? He would only save that which he thought he could sell, otherwise it had no value?

HANS BURKHARDT: He was so disgusted with the whole thing. He just worked and worked and worked, and he staved to death, almost. The poor fellow was so poor - he lived on donuts and coffee.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Which sometimes you brought to him?

HANS BURKHARDT: I brought him cheese and the coffee and groceries and I put it in the kitchen. That was my greatest pleasure. But I never spoke to Gorky, about it - never. And I still have the key to his studio, which was the only one he ever gave to anybody, as far as I know. But I learned how to see and think. I learned when to work clean, how to think, when you could be sloppy again. When you make strokes, how you leave the paint like this, where you push that brush around just like the European school, what do they call them? Appel and the group.

JEAN-LUC BORDEAUX: Oh, he means the CoBrA movement.

HANS BURKHARDT: The CoBrA. They were looking at de Kooning. But de Kooning still is a great draftsman and they are not. When you see something of his, it's still done with something behind it. He learned the basics and a student the same way. I don't care how far a student goes. They can go as far as they want, but they have start at the bottom. They come from the bottom up, and find something, and do research on it and they can go as far as they want. But to start on top, it doesn't work. Like the CoBrA School more or less copied de Kooning. And de Kooning copied Gorky. Gorky, in the early paintings, was not free but he always made a Gorky out of it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And you actually saw Gorky splattering canvases?

HANS BURKHARDT: Oh, yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: How did he do it, though? Did he do it with them down on the ground?

HANS BURKHARDT: Yes. Then he'd draw - in the early thirties, then he'd throw them out again, then he tore everything up and threw it out.

JEAN-LUC BORDEAUX: Was he using those accidental shapes, those spots, or whatever, spatters of paint, as a point of departure?

HANS BURKHARDT: No. When he made the spatters, it was always with the knowledge of the design behind it. He just didn't go this way. See, he made a movement. It was just the way he drew his spatter.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What he drew was spatters, then?

HANS BURKHARDT: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And so it wasn't that he would arbitrarily spatter paint and then get back and look and see an image emerge and then start working in?

HANS BURKHARDT: No, no. Same thing like Pollock. Pollock was drawing like an old master, when he was with Thomas Hart Benton.

JEAN-LUC BORDEAUX: ...is going to be doing what we are talking about.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But much later.

HANS BURKHARDT: Much later. You see, he didn't spatter like the kids think of spatter. He made his movement of the figures which he drew when he went to school.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's right. He studied with Thomas Hart Benton who had this great rhythm - almost a mannerist kind of thing.

HANS BURKHARDT: Yeah. You see, he had the same movement when he made the spatter. He just didn't spatter any old way; he had the movement of this education behind it. Which was a great way to depart from the realism of the thirties.

JEAN-LUC BORDEAUX: But still, I cannot imagine how you can throw paint in the air, for instance, and that whatever trajectory of pigment you have thrown can materialize on a piece of paper, with the same type of, you know, linear quality. I'm sure there were lots of ...

HANS BURKHARDT: It became accidental.

JEAN-LUC BORDEAUX: It became very accidental, yeah.

HANS BURKHARDT: You see, when Gorky did something, he had the hand already in the movement which he took mostly from the old masters. He studied certain old masters very carefully. He wanted to draw like Ingres.

Beautiful, clean. And he could draw like early Picasso. He could draw like a master. In the school he used to be so excited, he used to take the paint or charcoal and really move there. It was a joy to go to that class.

JEAN-LUC BORDEAUX: I have a question which has been in my mind for some time. You have been active now since about 1928, with some periods of intermission. Up to this moment, this day, 1974, how many paintings have you done do you think?

HANS BURKHARDT: I never counted them. (laughter)

JEAN-LUC BORDEAUX: I think you are one of the most prolific artists alive today, and I think that some artists today are just satisfied with one painting a year. This happens quite a bit actually.

HANS BURKHARDT: Oh, no. I make thousands of prints a year now - a couple of thousand. Two or three thousand prints alone. I make at least 300 pastels of the nude a year.

JEAN-LUC BORDEAUX: It is absolutely amazing the production of this man.

HANS BURKHARDT: And right now I enjoy print making for the simple reason that if anything happens to me, even a person who has little money can buy at least a print, and I make small editions - one, two, three - sometimes ten; sometimes twenty. But in general, I just make small editions and I experiment all the time, find new ways of making the print again.

JEAN-LUC BORDEAUX: In the last two years, there is definitely a spirit of joy. I don't want to use the word "hope" because I don't want to project on you my critical point of view. But there is definitely a major difference between what you have been doing in the last two years, and what you did in the sixties, for instance. You are not on the same level anymore. You are dealing less with war, tragedies, personal anger...

HANS BURKHARDT: No. Very little war. Some political things. But I make some beautiful paintings - the journey into the unknown, and how its made an abstraction from something realistic. And I find methods of working which are very interesting.

JEAN-LUC BORDEAUX: You seem to go back to - I'm trying to see again some kind of a parallel here. You are following a little bit the same route as Picasso, for instance.

HANS BURKHARDT: More or less the same, yes.

JEAN-LUC BORDEAUX: You keep painting away for a bit and go back into printing, engraving, or lithography. But most of the themes you are exploring revolve around sex and love.

HANS BURKHARDT: I made some beautiful paintings of sex.

JEAN-LUC BORDEAUX: Is it because of some rejuvenation or rebirth or what?

HANS BURKHARDT: Well, something happens and you make a certain thing which you love, in a happy moment, and you live in peace for a while before the stupid politicians get on the air again, you know? Things are happy; we have a happy home here, and I make a lot of beautiful things which when you look at them bring joy: a figure, a form, a new creation of something. I made some things of my sister who passed away, the sad things, the way she slowly passed away, and then she was dead. You know, almost like Kollwitz. And then I make the memory of her, the beautiful home she had, the beautiful places I saw from her house overlooking the rooftops in Basel, I make some of the scenery like that. I make the door she went through for 30 years into a beautiful thing. There are certain personal things. Then I go in the mountains, in the Swiss mountains and I make the beautiful scenery, simple landscape, or the breakfast table she had there. All things like that, personal things. Then, for example, when I was in Switzerland, I made the crane. You see cranes all over. I made the cranes, at the museum, I saw that Holbein made the dead Christ, about 12 inches high by six feet. And I made a design from the crane and from it I made the dead Christ, tall and narrow, like Holbein. And no shape was taken from the human body; it was all taken from the crane, and it made a beautiful Christ. So when something - always something has to happen, if you make a print or a painting for a drawing. I have all these sketch books and sometimes I only find one drawing worthwhile making into a painting. It all depends on the movement, where you go. If nothing happens there, you just don't make any good drawings either.

THORDIS BURHARDT: Well, why does your work seem more joyful?

HANS BURKHARDT: I live happier now. You see, I have no arguments with anybody. In the morning I get up and I see the sunshine; it's a beautiful day. I go in the studio; I can do what I want. I don't have to worry about material; I've got all the material I need. I've got everything. I've got a good wife; she does everything. She helps me, you know. We have a wonderful home; we have no headaches; we have no debts. Every day is a joy of life. And when I go into the studio, the cats are there. They lie there when I paint, and it's always a new

experience. Every day is something new coming up.

JEAN-LUC BORDEAUX: All of your work is related to life anyway, actually. Even when you are dealing with death, it's in terms of life. This is what it is, actually. And this is very helpful. Do you have any religion that you believe in?

HANS BURKHARDT: No. My religion is this way: there is a God, but he is not a God the way the people make him here, with a long beard. There's something which controls everything, which is beyond me. You see, when I was in Mexico, I saw how the religion is misused there, you know, just for the benefit of the Opoe and a few people, which is wrong. Instead of the church helping the poor people, they take from the poor, and they don't help the poor. This is not my religion. My religion is this: if I can do something in this world which will live after I'm gone, that's the best I can do. I can say I've done my share; God gave me a talent; I used it the best way I could. Whoever God is, I don't know; I do the best I can and try to be honest and whatever happens after, then let it happen; it's beyond me. But if my paintings live and the things I've created, I've done something in this world which God gave me the talent for, and which I've used in the best way I could. That's my religion. Be good to everybody and do the right thing. I'm against disorder. I believe in decency and that we all should love each other.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You're a humanist, then, basically. Your religion is humanism.

HANS BURKHARDT: When I go, I want to be cremated. I'll go like everybody else, but if I leave my paintings and they are accepted, I will have given something which I leave in spirit with the people.

JEAN-LUC BORDEAUX: Which is beautiful also. I think it's your enthusiasm. You communicate to your students your enthusiasm. It's amazing, for instance the life your drawings have now even though you are retired. Those classes are still being attended by a large group of people.

HANS BURKHARDT: Always.

JEAN-LUC BORDEAUX: They still look to Hans in terms of learning more about simply what the human body is about. There is still more to explore and to find.

HANS BURKHARDT: I showed for example today - when the model lies down, I generally make a sketch of the model. Actually done realistically, but free. And they just loved it. And then I show how I simplify that and change it. The last one I make, the third or fourth one, becomes an abstract almost like a piece of sculpture. But without the first one, I never could've made the last one. And I said, just look how you can create a beautiful piece of sculpture out of this form which is there. So when they think for themselves, they realize they cannot make the last one first. You've go to go step by step until it is right, no matter how far you want to go.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I think that's interesting because one would have to describe your work truly as abstraction, implying something - abstracting from nature. It really is quite different from the non-objective, which doesn't necessarily take the point of departure in nature. It seems to me that you require that there is always this starting point in nature.

HANS BURKHARDT: I can go as far as I can in abstracting from the figure.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But nevertheless, you always start from...

HANS BURKHARDT: I always start. Let me say this: God created the world so perfect I cannot improve on it. If you want something to agree you make a photograph. But from God's creation, I make my own. It may not be as good as God has created the thing because you cannot work that perfect. But still I make my own forms, my own figure which is my world. You see, I make the feeling of forms loving each other. It doesn't have to be human beings; it can be the abstract shapes taken from the human being which can love each other, too.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I've another question. Earlier you were talking about Gorky and the erotic - well, let's put it this way: looking at small things, right? And looking at the biological aspect, say a woman's body, and then abstracting, making it part of a design. Does this have anything to do with your recent work? Do you see what I mean? The erotic works that are - what's the term? Based on sex, or based on ...

JEAN-LUC BORDEAUX: Well, there are some that are really erotic. There seems to be an erotic implication.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, I'm not saying explicitly erotic, but whatever the term that you want to apply to the recent work.

HANS BURKHARDT: Well, Gorky influenced me to make some of these things, although I made them before. For example, I made a painting in 1939-40 of lovers with big male organs, you know, in a beautiful way...

THORDIS BURHARDT: ...it was in 48.

HANS BURKHARDT: Was it in 48? Well, whenever it was, in whatever period it was, I made one on top of the other. You know, the feeling of love, done in a beautiful way. And when I showed it in the Museum of Modern Art in Beverly Hills, people looked at it and then looked the other way. Today, it is accepted as old fashioned. When it's done with finesse, it's done a beautiful way it shouldn't offend anybody.

PAUL KARLSTROM: No, I was just curious, though, how it came about that you decided to work with the subject again, work in this direction.

HANS BURKHARDT: Well, I've been doing it more or less all through the years. I've got some early paintings...

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, I thought Bordeaux there stimulated you to ...

THORDIS BURHARDT: Well, to start up again I guess.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I'm trying to give Jean-Luc credit on this tape. (laughter)

HANS BURKHARDT: I made paintings in the late forties, I created my own figures with little heads and I made a whole period from that. And it gives the feeling when you look at it of people who live on a different planet.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Is the pastel you now have hanging on your wall from this series? The man with the green face? He seems to have such a small head.

JEAN-LUC BORDEAUX: That's an early - very early drawing.

HANS BURKHARDT: A prize fighter posed for that.

JEAN-LUC BORDEAUX: It's actually quite strong and powerful.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But he has a small head.

JEAN-LUC BORDEAUX: He has a small head which makes his - I mean it's very large. That makes him very large.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Powerful.

HANS BURKHARDT: No, but I made a lot of figures with little pinheads - like Giacometti made the long figures, I made those things with the same feeling, long and very much abstracted. I would put them into a landscape or I made the dancers. I made a beautiful painting at the end of the dancer series. You see all those figures carrying one of the dead ones, and the father and mother looking at it. And those forms were very, very sculpture-like. And if I would have made sculpture at that time, I would have been before Giacometti. But you only go so far and then you search for something new. When I went to Mexico everything changed again.

JEAN-LUC BORDEAUX: I know that you started as a craftsman. You have made furniture. I know that you have built your own house. You are constantly, every day, involved in building, in repairing things with your hands. How come you have never actually tried your hand at sculpture?

HANS BURKHARDT: Because I haven't got enough time. You see, now I have come into printing.

JEAN-LUC BORDEAUX: But, you start with an image and you try to explore several combinations of colors with the same physical design. Right? That's what you are doing right now. You are trying to explore various ways of expressing the same thing in different arrangements, different colors. I think this is quite a puzzle for someone who is so gifted in terms of putting things together. Also, you are very sensuous in your approach to painting, I mean the way you pile up pigments and paint on the surface of your paintings. Have you ever tried carving or assembling?

HANS BURKHARDT: Well, I feel that if I would have worked, for example, in a machine shop, perhaps I would have done sculpture with metal, but the material never was around me to make the sculpture. except woods. And even that, I just didn't get around to.

THORDIS BURHARDT: I have suggested that he do some sculpting and he said it would take a lifetime to learn to be a good painter, so he didn't feel he had enough time this time around. Maybe next time. Next time he wants to be a musician. (laughter) Maybe the time after that he can be a sculptor.

HANS BURKHARDT: I once wanted to make a piece of sculpture but I couldn't get - I wanted to put a mummy there where the burial is - a real mummy, the way I saw them in Guadalajara, when the students got through, bones and skin and all. And if I could've gotten one of these, I would have loved to make a construction with that

as a model for a piece of sculpture.

THORDIS BURHARDT: Oh, my Lord! Thank God, you couldn't get it! (laughter) That would've been too much.

JEAN-LUC BORDEAUX: I would like to ask you a few other things. What are your personal comments or your personal inclinations toward some of the other contemporary artists. I know that sometimes you have, in my personal conversations with you, been violently against certain contemporary directions. I mean, first of all, in the last 20 years, for instance, back to the early fifties, what are the artists that you have especially like? Were you really impressed by any one in particular?

HANS BURKHARDT: I liked Tobey. I bought Tobey. There are certain people we collected, yes. You know, we collected Kollwitz, Braque, Picasso. We have a big print collection. I like Fritz Faisse, Fritz Schwaderer and ...

PAUL KARLSTROM: But none of these are recent.

HANS BURKHARDT: Yes, they both are.

JEAN-LUC BORDEAUX: Fritz Faiss, by the way, is an interesting artist.

HANS BURKHARDT: A very intelligent person.

JEAN-LUC BORDEAUX: I don't know if Paul knows about him. He was involved directly with the Bauhaus, if I'm not mistaken.

HANS BURKHARDT: Yeah.

JEAN-LUC BORDEAUX: He was - I mean I shouldn't say he was because he's still very much alive. He has been teaching in Northridge. He was a colleague of Hans at Northridge.

THORDIS BURHARDT: He was a medical doctor. Did you know that?

JEAN-LUC BORDEAUX: He was a medical doctor, and he was especially known for the investigation of color. I mean, of the color field in a very scientific way. Very much in the tradition of Goethe, for instance, if you want to go back to the 19th century. And it's here - another very important man in California who is currently obviously neglected, and simply because he is not that type of pure, maybe artist, in the sense that he is a universal man, a little bit.

HANS BURKHARDT: Of course, I always had good relationships in print making with Fricano. Tom Fricano is one of the teachers there, and he's a printmaker, known as a printmaker. And he's the one who got me interested in printmaking.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I was going to ask you how you got started.

HANS BURKHARDT: In 1948, 49, I went to Lynton Kistler, who made lithographs here. And I used to go to his studio. I made drawings on a stone and then he made three or four, five or six prints. And the next time we came, we made a new stone again. So he worked in printmaking. We used to draw on the stone, and he'd teach us how to make it right and then he used to make a few prints. But lithography is not my way, I made some in Mexico, by myself. But it's not the medium I like. I worked at that. And then, in the school, I made etchings. I made some big plates, etchings. Came out very nice, but it's not my medium; I'm a painter. I want to see big things and bold things. Etchings I made, beautiful etchings. And I etched them and printed them myself. It's not my medium either. And then I found linoleum. It doesn't look like a linoleum cut anymore, you see, but it's more like my type of work with guts, which the other mediums haven't got. And the big stone is too hard to carry around and make these prints. Although today, they make them on a piece of transfer paper, whatever, and put it on the stone. But when you are alone, you cannot take those big stones and work them, it takes too damn long. I like to make every print a little bit different. I'm against the factory which is perfectly alright for certain people, like they make 500 Picasso prints or Braque or whatever it is. I like to make them myself and I make an edition of 10 and every one has a little bit of a different thing. The same thing but they're all a little big different. That means each one would be an original.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's right.

HANS BURKHARDT: It's the same thing as when the New York schools say, "to hell with you conservative people. I've got to be free." That's what I'm doing now. If I make ten prints, they are not all alike. They belong to the same series, but one is a little bit darker here, a little bit more paint there and so on, and this is my pleasure. And Fricano was the one who got me interested in printmaking in 1970. I saw him today again. He just loves my prints now, because they've become my own, my own handwriting. I took my designs from the "Journey into the Unknown" series of paintings, and made a group. When we were in Europe in '65, I saw a monument in Holland,

a war monument, and I made my own designs to make a monument going up to heaven almost. I made a print of this, a series. Always a series again. And then I made the old city. Prints. Then I make lovers, with the abstract shapes of love. Then I try different colors. In other words, I make three, four, five different colors on a print. I use acid to burn the linoleum. I use oven cleaner which burns into the linoleum.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Acid on the linoleum? That's one of the strongest things of all, yeah.

HANS BURKHARDT: But you have to be a technician or you'll get it on your hands or eyes. All my paintings, they're all technically well made.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You mean the prints, now?

HANS BURKHARDT: The prints, too. They're all technically well make. But even the paintings, they're all on linen canvas, they are all prepared in the old-fashioned way with white lead and retouch varnish. I build them up myself. Technically, they will not get bad because they're made the best way possible. Same way with the prints now. Only use good paper, and it's a pleasure to print on good paper. I've got stacks of other paper, but I use only the best. And the school is going to get one of each of all my prints.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, you've referred to this obliquely several times. I thought it would be interesting to hear just what your plans are regarding California State University at Northridge. I understand that you have plans to establish a representation of your own work along with part of your collection.

HANS BURKHARDT: That's right. Our paintings, many of them, never were for sale. For me, they have no money value; you cannot buy them because it's my life. The greatest pleasure I get - I lived in America, had a good life here; I can do something for the people. These paintings should belong to the people. They're anti-war paintings, anti-lynching paintings, the beautiful things of love. But they belong to the people and that's where they should go. Same way with the pastels. They can come and pick as many of the pastels that they want, all the good pastels from all the different years. They can get as many as they want, and they're still thousands left. For example, I picked out, out of four thousand early ones of the 1960's, I picked out about 500 of the best ones. Now they can pick the best ones from that. And it shows the periods from all my paintings, when the drawing was made and the painting was made after that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So it's really a model study collection of the evolution of your own work and ...

HANS BURKHARDT: Yeah.

JEAN-LUC BORDEAUX: Hans' pastels are probably the most well felt. I think that they represent really the synthesis of his career and also of his talent. It's very intuitive.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I was wondering if there was anything, Jean-Luc, that you could think of that probably should be added to this tape. Any questions that we may have missed or maybe Hans can think of something that we have ignored. Obviously, nothing like this is totally thorough and comprehensive. There are some things perhaps more important than others to record.

JEAN-LUC BORDEAUX: Well, something that has already been documented is the relationship or the lack of relationship that Hans has had with the establishment here in Los Angeles, the contemporary scene, for instance, or the contemporary trends, all the so-called New York schools, the Los Angeles school or whatever. Also the achievements or the lack of achievements of the museums around here. I mean, that's something that's very important I think for the future for anyone who would just listen to Hans' tape and try to determine what Los Angeles has been in 1974.

HANS BURKHARDT: In the catalog here, you see all the different shows I was in, you know, the Whitney, the Metropolitan, Sao Paula, South America and all the different things; it's all written there. And I used to have a lot of exhibitions, but today I see what's going on. I live in a different world. I'm not a young man like those people. I've nothing against what they do today because it's a different generation. I'm still in my generation and I belong to it.

THORDIS BURHARDT: No, but you do object to the fact that they are promoting only one kind of work, don't you? You feel that people who perform in different manners should also be accepted.

JEAN-LUC BORDEAUX: You must have some sort of feeling because after all, art is not a new thing. Art, as long as man has been what man is, has been existing. You know, even just by studying what art has been the last 1500 years, we still can discover some basic values that most nations or races have really, I would say, respecting. I mean, today I think you have expressed several times that some of those values are completely destroyed and replaced by absolutely nothing. Is this right or am I putting words in your mouth?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, you are, but...(laughter).

HANS BURKHARDT: No, I feel this way. In every period, there are a few geniuses. If one likes it or not, it's not important. They have found something new, but then come all the imitators and they all get fame. Somebody who doesn't know anything about art gets in the shows, and the people who are really working in the field of art like Gorky was forgotten when they leave, because they didn't belong to a certain group. Like you go into the museum, you see what they collect and it makes you sick.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You mean the Los Angeles County Museum?

HANS BURKHARDT: Yes, it makes you sick. And the good things are in the basement. I'd like to see Jean-Luc go there and go in the basement and put on a show from the things that they hide. I bet he could put a damn good show up.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Let me ask you, speaking of contemporary artists, in this case Los Angeles artists now dead, I have a curious feeling that maybe you would respond to this. But John Altoon, do you remember him.

HANS BURKHARDT: He was a good friend of mine. John Altoon followed Gorky very much and he was a genius, and it's too bad he had to go so early because he was the best artist from all the young ones. He had the most guts, the most originality. To me he was the greatest from the whole group.

PAUL KARLSTROM: How did you meet Altoon?

HANS BURKHARDT: He lived here, down in the canyon. We always came together. We used to eat together. He was a very, very nice person, Altoon. But a little bit crazy. If you're normal, generally you don't become such a great artist. It's always when you have a little something abnormal, like Altoon.

PAUL KARLSTROM: He had a little too much abnormality.

HANS BURKHARDT: Maybe too much abnormal but that's what made him great because he saw things differently.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But I mean, if there's a contemporary, or at least recent California artist whom you can respond to.

HANS BURKHARDT: Sure.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And who carries on some of the values, certainly draftsmanship. No question about it, and a sense of freedom and color.

HANS BURKHARDT: From the whole group of those youngsters from that period, Altoon was the greatest. And there was Knud Merrild here in the forties and fifties. Knud Merrild was the forerunner of the Jackson Pollock school. He did spatter; he made flux. He was another friend of mine. He died in Denmark, I think, much too soon.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I wondered what happened to him because I read about him but I don't know where...

HANS BURKHARDT: He died - he made flux paintings like the New York School. He was one of the forerunners of the New York School, but he went to Denmark, and died over there. He was a housepainter, and his lungs were full of lead. He was a good modern painter. There were a few - Altoon was the greatest from the group. Knud Merrild was the greatest one from that period in the style he made. There was Fred Kann, a hard edge painter. He was a master in hard edge and spray paintings, little paintings in the hard edge school. Beautiful things he did.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What about a contemporary of yours, although I don't want to say you're exactly the same age, but you mentioned a hard edge painter, and here's an artist who has been in southern California since the early forties, John McLaughlin.

HANS BURKHARDT: I know him well.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You do know him well?

HANS BURKHARDT: Of course, I know all those people.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, you see, what I'm getting at is we're discovering there's really more of a connection between the artists than you led me to believe early on, where you say there was no sense of community.

THORDIS BURHARDT: Well, there wasn't any constant getting together.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But still, there wasn't complete isolation between them.

THORDIS BURHARDT: Oh, heavens, no.

HANS BURKHARDT: For example, Feitelsen, if you look at his things, if you like his things or not, if you look at Feitelsen, it shows how he changed, little by little, until he arrived at what he is doing today. If people like it or not, it's his privilege to do it. He paints what he believes. But others start right on top and it doesn't work that way. Same thing with the young ones. Like Altoon was a genius in that group. You might find another one or two great ones. But all the others are imitators and it's not the same anymore. Altoon was a fine draftsman; that's why his things are good.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, he was a superb draftsman; there's no question about it.

HANS BURKHARDT: But there were these people; we were friends. We came together many times.

THORDIS BURHARDT: But you didn't really like hard edge painting very much.

HANS BURKHARDT: I like hard edge if it's done right. For example, I have seen some hard edge paintings which Gorky made as experiments and they were beautifully put together.

PAUL KARLSTROM: In what sense? In terms of the composition, the balance of forms?

HANS BURKHARDT: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I see. I would think that you would feel it's basically very cold, hard edge paintings.

HANS BURKHARDT: You know, I feel that if a painting doesn't say anything, it may be decoration, but if it's a square which is made hundreds of times with different colors - Malevich made that in 1909 - white, white, white; black, black, black. Now how much further can you go?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, I don't know. What do you think of Albers and Reinhardt?

HANS BURKHARDT: To me, it is not enough. They make so much fuss because Reinhardt makes a big panel, 12 feet high, 4 feet wide to put together, and on the bottom he puts the molding which you see on every floor, and every house has a molding on the bottom, so what's so new about it? (laughter) They act like nobody put some molding on the floor. When you put a carpet there, you have a molding on the wall. It may be alright, but I don't think it's outstanding.

PAUL KARLSTROM: They keep making moldings.

JEAN-LUC BORDEAUX: They keep making squares also. You mentioned Malevich and Albers. It took many years, I mean when you realize that Malevich's squares you refer to are somewhere in the late 1910 and 1920's, and then you wait for Albers to go back and do the square but in a completely different way. He is more interested in colors really. Or the inter??????????? of certain colors.

HANS BURKHARDT: Exactly. But it leaves me cold. They act like nobody ever made a square.

JEAN-LUC BORDEAUX: Yes, but to a certain extent would you agree that in this case Albers is quite lyrical in the way he established progressions.

HANS BURKHARDT: It's alright but to me, it leaves me cold.

JEAN-LUC BORDEAUX: Do you think it is some kind of research, or some kind of an exploration, which would go along the line of the Bauhaus school?

HANS BURKHARDT: Yeah, yeah, but I think you only make so much and then you look for something else again. You don't keep it up because there's a demand for it. So you make lithographs by the thousands, you know, so everybody can buy one which is a good way of making a living. There's nothing wrong, but if you have a square on the wall, it doesn't say too much to me. Then look at Mondrian, you see little by little how he came to his last ones. It has quality; it's painted. Beautiful. They are masterpieces.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You mean like the New York ones, Broadway Boogie Woogie and like that.

JEAN-LUC BORDEAUX: But I'm sure that, although I don't know the early phases of Albers' career...

HANS BURKHARDT: He made some good paintings.

JEAN-LUC BORDEAUX: But he also, I mean you can find the same progression...

THORDIS BURHARDT: We were quite amazed in Basel when we saw a show of Mondrian's where he had windmills and flower paintings like old masters.

JEAN-LUC BORDEAUX: Very abstracted sort of things.

THORDIS BURHARDT: No - very realistic.

HANS BURKHARDT: I noticed all the great painters, I don't care how far they go, they're all good draftsmen right from the beginning, in their own way. Everyone of them. Look at Mondrian when he made flowers, windmills, everything. Little by little, he arrived. Paul Klee - his early things. Did you ever hear of Mathias Isoeritz(?)

PAUL KARLSTROM: I don't think so.

HANS BURKHARDT: He was a German painter. Made sculpture. He shows in New York sometimes. He made those three big towers in Mexico. He's in Mexico at the University.

JEAN-LUC BORDEAUX: Oh, I know. He's the one who made those huge towers at the entrance of the Avenida del Paz.

HANS BURKHARDT: Yes. He was with Paul Klee. He was a smart German. He got away from Hitler because he was Jewish, and he was an intelligent person. He went to Paul Klee and lived with him a half a year, then he had to get out of Switzerland and went to France. From France he went to Miro in Spain and finally to a Spanish Cloister in Africa. He came to Mexico later on. I have a beautiful painting of his, very much like Miro. He was a very, very intelligent man. He's the forerunner of some of those things in Mexico.

JEAN-LUC BORDEAUX: In terms of your own philosophy, I mean what art means to you, from our discussion and our interview that we have been having, I'm quite convinced that you seem to hold the visual aspect of art more important than content, really, or the message.

HANS BURKHARDT: Yes, that's right.

JEAN-LUC BORDEAUX: Which is to an extent very much against the trend of the day which is very intellectual. The visual part is reduced to nothing, to a point that it's even repulsive. Not stimulating in terms of the perceptive point of view, I don't know how you react to it, but...

HANS BURKHARDT: If it doesn't do anything to me I can't be interested in it. I can see something modern and see it has something to it. I look into it. I don't just say it's junk. But when I see something, like a fellow taking a string and stretching it from one point to another and call that an exhibition, I think it's not enough. Or they make a couple of steps. You make it small so you cannot walk up on it. This is great art?

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's Joe Goode, he's talking about.

HANS BURKHARDT: Or the fellow uses a fluorescent light; he puts it in a corner this way...

PAUL KARLSTROM: ...Flavin.

HANS BURKHARDT: Yeah. I mean, it's all right as an experiment, then go further.

JEAN-LUC BORDEAUX: Do you see any direction for the future?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Let's have a bit of prophecy.

HANS BURKHARDT: Well, who knows, because the dealers and the critics make the style. They say now this is past, there's going to be a new style. It's going to be realism. I have nothing against realism if it's done well, but if it's done a bad way, it's nothing new.

JEAN-LUC BORDEAUX: What about pop art?

HANS BURKHARDT: Pop art? It had a certain time when it belonged, but then the people go further again. Now there are a few geniuses in an field who will live, like [Kurt] Schwitters. He made most of these things in the twenties already. When you go back, you find all these things done by someone in another country or another time.

JEAN-LUC BORDEAUX: The effect Schwitters had on people like Rauschenberg, for instance, or some aspect of Rauschenberg.

HANS BURKHARDT: Now Rauschenberg will live because he's still a good draftsman. I think he has done some

good things.

JEAN-LUC BORDEAUX: There's always a sense of structure. Very much.

HANS BURKHARDT: Yes, always something, he has still culture behind it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, you know who's a wonderful draftsman - Oldenburg.

HANS BURKHARDT: He's done some bad things.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But he's a good draftsman. I mean, his drawings have...

HANS BURKHARDT: I've seen some drawings that were horrible, some of them.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Really? I've seen some lovely things.

HANS BURKHARDT: Well, he's a draftsman in a certain way.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I mean, he's interested in drawing at any rate.

HANS BURKHARDT: Yeah, but anything he makes, he gave a water boiler to the Museum of Modern Art, an old used one.

THORDIS BURHARDT: No, that was Andy Warhol.

HANS BURKHARDT: Oh, Andy Warhol, for example. That thing is overrated.

PAUL KARLSTROM: A what? A water boiler?

HANS BURKHARDT: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I don't even know about that; you're ahead of me. That's too much. That's too avant-garde.

HANS BURKHARDT: He gave it to them just the way it was, and they accepted it!

END OF INTERVIEW

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