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Oral history interview with Raphael Soyer, 1981 May 13-June 1

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Raphael Soyer on May 13, 1981. The interview was conducted by Milton Brown for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

Tape 1, side A

MILTON BROWN: This is an interview with Raphael Soyer with Milton Brown interviewing. Raphael, we've known each other for a very long time, and over the years you have written a great deal about your life, and I know you've given many interviews. I'm doing this especially because the Archives wants a kind of update. It likes to have important American artists interviewed at intervals, so that as time goes by we keep talking to America's famous artists over the years.
I don't know that we'll dig anything new out of your past, but let's begin at the beginning. See if we can skim over the early years abroad and coming here in general. I'd just like you to reminisce about your early years, your birth, and how you came here.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Well, of course I was born in Russia, in the Czarist Russia, and I came here in 1912 when I was twelve years old. That was before the Revolution. We came here because my father was involved with some of the Russian university students, and he became a suspect by the police.

MILTON BROWN: A political suspect.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Yes. And they took away from him a document which translated means "the right to live." In other words, we lived in a part of Russia where Jews had to have a special permission.

MILTON BROWN: What section of Russia was it?

RAPHAEL SOYER: That was southeast Russia. It was quite a distance from Moscow. I don't know any geography, so I can't tell you exactly where it was. There were only about fifty Jewish families in that city of about 50,000 inhabitants.

MILTON BROWN: What was the name of the city?

RAPHAEL SOYER: The name of the city was [Borisoglesk] and it was the province of [Tambolv]. And my father there was the, well, the intellectual leader of the Jewish community. He taught the children of those Jewish people, who, most of them, were what I would call stockbrokers.
Well, we came to this country and were a large family, six children, father and mother. And first we came to Philadelphia, where we stayed for about a year with relatives of my mother. My father went to New York to look for a job, a teaching job, and he became the first professor of the Hebrew literature at what is it called, that famous Yeshiva here?

MILTON BROWN: The Yeshiva, Yeshiva College?

RAPHAEL SOYER: Yeshiva College. And even now, for a good composition in Hebrew, they're giving an Abraham Soyer Prize, something like a hundred dollars. It's called Abraham Soyer Prize. And we came to New York. We, the brothers—Moses, Isaac, and myself—found it very difficult to acclimate ourselves to this country, this language, because we came at a time of adolescence, especially Moses and I, and we kind of withdrew within ourselves after a while, and we. . . .

MILTON BROWN: What were you, twelve years old?

RAPHAEL SOYER: Well, by the time we came to New York we were thirteen and fourteen years old, almost fourteen. And we became kind of alienated people, Moses and I especially.

MILTON BROWN: Well, Isaac was younger?

RAPHAEL SOYER: Isaac was younger. Isaac was a little bit more a child yet, more of a child, yes. And, but Moses and I had an especially difficult time. Our sisters became very much, very soon, Americanized. They got good marks in school. I mean, that became their great interest. They went through college, and they were quite successful here as young Americans.
Moses and I had quite a difficult time. I mean we went to high school for a little while, and we were, again, noncommunicative, so to speak. And after a while, to our great relief, we left high school and became so much

interested in art that an excuse to leave high school was to go to academy or to the other art schools.

MILTON BROWN: How old were you when. . . ?

RAPHAEL SOYER: Well, we went to Cooper Union when we were about sixteen years old, Moses and I. We went at night. We worked during the day. We had the kind of typical jobs of those days. They were, in other words, selling newspapers, and being messenger boys, and so on. But at night we went to Cooper Union, and there we felt more at ease than in high school or public school and so on, because we were with our peers, and they were older than we, but we felt equal to them because we drew as well as they did.

MILTON BROWN: How did you get, both of you, involved in art?

RAPHAEL SOYER: Well, our father was interested in art, and our mother was interested in art. And our father even drew somewhat in Russia. We knew, we had postcards of Russian artists on the wall. He pinned them on the wall as decorations, to decorate the house, and we knew the names of the famous Russian artists when we were children. And we were encouraged to draw. I mean, like all children.

MILTON BROWN: Did you and Moses draw when you were still in Russia?

RAPHAEL SOYER: Yeah.

MILTON BROWN: As children?

RAPHAEL SOYER: Yeah, it was not a revelation to us. I mean, we grew into art from childhood on, so it wasn't anything tremendous, I mean a great revelation at all. I mean, we just drew, and we grew into it and we came to this country and. . . .

MILTON BROWN: You remember the first picture you ever drew?

RAPHAEL SOYER: Well, I don't remember. I remember that when we were very, very young we were on the floor, Moses and I, copying the portrait of Tolstoy.

MILTON BROWN: Oh! [chuckles]

RAPHAEL SOYER: That's interesting.

MILTON BROWN: That's interesting!

RAPHAEL SOYER: Yeah, we were on the floor with the paper, and we were making copies of. . . .

MILTON BROWN: Copy of. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: . . . from the newspapers.

MILTON BROWN: I remember the first picture that in my memory was that I drew soldiers . . . because it was World War I. My first memory was World WarI. I was five or six years old and I was drawing soldiers.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Well, World WarI. I was at the academy, and I remember very distinctly I was painting. Just I and the model were in the room. Everybody left, and I heard from distance some sounds of jubilations or parades or something like that, but I stayed in and painted, and the model was in. That was at the National Academy of Art. That was 1918, right?

MILTON BROWN: Yeah.

RAPHAEL SOYER: So I was about 17 or 18 when I came to the Academy.

MILTON BROWN: But at first you went to Cooper Union.

RAPHAEL SOYER: When we were very young, we went to the Cooper Union at night.

MILTON BROWN: Both of you?

RAPHAEL SOYER: Moses and I. And then Moses and I separated. We wanted to go to different schools. Moses went to the Educational Alliance. I stayed at the Academy.

MILTON BROWN: Who did you study with at the Academy?

RAPHAEL SOYER: I studied with. . . .

MILTON BROWN: Well, first of all, where did they start you? At cast drawing?

RAPHAEL SOYER: No, we started in life.

MILTON BROWN: With life. You'd already had. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: We were at Cooper Union, I think, for a while already in life class.

MILTON BROWN: Yeah.

RAPHAEL SOYER: We started in life class, and, let's see, the instructors were Charles C. Curran. . . .

MILTON BROWN: Curran, uh huh.

RAPHAEL SOYER: And Francis C. Jones. But also a very old man for a while, that was George Maynard. George W. Maynard. Do you remember these names?

MILTON BROWN: I remember the name. . . . Curran, I remember.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Curran.

MILTON BROWN: But I don't remember Jones.

RAPHAEL SOYER: He painted I think interiors or something like that. And Maynard was really a man who impressed me, you know. He was very old. I mean, to me he seemed very old at that time with some kind of distinguished face. I think George Luks painted him in a costume of a monk or something. Anyhow, he became very friendly with me. He spoke a little Russian. He was a sailor at one time. And for the fun of it he'd speak a little Russian. And I remember once I was painting. . . . And I didn't finish the painting, so he said, "Why don't you finish it? You haven't got an ocean of time." He was a very old man, and he impressed me by saying that. "You haven't got an ocean of time." He said, "You're young, but you haven't got an ocean of time." Well, he impressed me, but the instructor who influenced me most was Guy Pene duBois. I went to the Art Students League for a while. My uncle, one of my uncles who was interested in my art paid my tuition. It was about fourteen dollars a month. And I went there for several months with Guy Pene duBois. And he was a kind of, not a very good teacher, but somehow he became interested in me. He was a kind of a very caustic, you know, sarcastic man.

MILTON BROWN: What year was that?

RAPHAEL SOYER: What year was that? I think in the 1920s, 1920, '21.

MILTON BROWN: Early on for him, because then he went to Paris, and he was away for a while.

RAPHAEL SOYER: He went to Paris and, yes, yes. Yes, I remember. But he had a school here. His own school on Lafayette Street. And even when I was not in his class, I would bring him and show him my work. And he was the one who recommended me to the Daniel Galleries.

MILTON BROWN: Oh?

RAPHAEL SOYER: He said, "Go, take this painting to Daniel Galleries and tell them that I sent you." And when I came there this old Mr. Charles Daniel and his assistant. . . . Was a man by the name of Hartpense, a very kind sickly man.

MILTON BROWN: [Allison, Alison] Hartpense.

RAPHAEL SOYER: [Allison, Allison] Hartpense, and they went into the room, by themselves, a little room, and they, after a while, they came out and said, "When you have twelve such pictures, we'll give you a one-man show." So it took me a year to make twelve pictures. I used to work weekends.

MILTON BROWN: Are those the cityscapes?

RAPHAEL SOYER: No, none of those. They were 1932. And I think I had my first exhibition in 1929. And, well, I mean, it was success.

MILTON BROWN: Yeah, yeah.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Although it was 1929, you know, the crash.

MILTON BROWN: Yeah, that was. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: Several pictures were sold. Henry McBride. You remember Henry McBride?

MILTON BROWN: Yeah, of course.

RAPHAEL SOYER: He wrote a very nice article in the Sun?

MILTON BROWN: Sun. He wrote for the Sun.

RAPHAEL SOYER: In the Sun, yes. Very nice article.

MILTON BROWN: Did you know any of the other artists at Daniel's at that time?

RAPHAEL SOYER: Not at that time, but I became later on acquainted, of course. Well, I knew Peter Bloom. Peter Bloom.

MILTON BROWN: Uh huh.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Peter Bloom was a friend of my brother, Moses. They went together to the Educational Alliance.

MILTON BROWN: Oh, Peter Bloom started at Educational Alliance?

RAPHAEL SOYER: Educational Alliance.

MILTON BROWN: Well, he was from Russia, too, wasn't he?

RAPHAEL SOYER: I think he was born here.

MILTON BROWN: Was he born here?

RAPHAEL SOYER: Born here. But Peter and Moses were very good friends. Actually Moses was his mentor, as Peter would tell you, you know. Peter was about seven years younger. He was a kid. He was really very young, and he became known much earlier than anybody else.

MILTON BROWN: Um hmm.

RAPHAEL SOYER: At the Daniel Gallery. Later on I got to know Kuniyoshi. And I got to know Alex Brook, of course. He was at that time with the Daniel Galleries. Nikolai Cikovsky became a very good friend, because he was a Russian.

MILTON BROWN: Were there any other artists with you at the National Academy then?

RAPHAEL SOYER: Well, at the National Academy I remember Ben Shahn. We were at the same class. And Meyer Schapiro.

MILTON BROWN: Meyer Schapiro was studying art then?

RAPHAEL SOYER: Yes. He was a little boy in knickers.

MILTON BROWN: Yeah.

RAPHAEL SOYER: But he was interested in other things. He was interested in scholarship, fellowships, or something, I don't know.

MILTON BROWN: Yeah, um hmm.

RAPHAEL SOYER: And Paul Cadmus.

MILTON BROWN: Paul Cadmus, that's interesting. I didn't think he was that old.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Now he's in his seventies, way in his seventies, yes. But Ben Shahn and I were very good friends, very good. Spent a lot of time together. And let's see, there were several others that I. . . . A fellow by the name of Landes Lewitin. And Lucioni.

MILTON BROWN: Lucioni.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Lucioni.

MILTON BROWN: It's fascinating. . . . I recently began to think of what happened to Luigi Lucioni? He had a big

reputation in the thirties, and then he disappeared completely.

RAPHAEL SOYER: That happened to quite a few.

MILTON BROWN: Yeah, but now they're painting a kind of photographic realism for which he was famous forty years ago or more.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Ah, yes. Well, it was kind of. . . .

MILTON BROWN: Do you think he's still alive?

RAPHAEL SOYER: Oh, he's still alive. I think somewhere in Maine.

MILTON BROWN: Uh huh. Well, he painted very much like Sheeler, except that. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: Well, yeah, except Sheeler had the more _____.

MILTON BROWN: [chuckles] Well, that's right.

RAPHAEL SOYER: I mean. . . . Well, Lucioni was more anecdotal, you know.

MILTON BROWN: He did still lifes.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Still lifes, yeah. But still there was something anecdotal in his work. Compared to Sheeler, at any rate. Sheeler was a much more intelligent. . . .

MILTON BROWN: Well, a more serious artist, I think, but it would be interesting to see a Lucioni again.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Yeah.

MILTON BROWN: Well, we. . . . In those days when you were in the Academy. . . . You know, in the class in the Academy everybody is talking, and they're talking about art. Who were the artists that you looked up to in those days? American artists?

RAPHAEL SOYER: American artists?

MILTON BROWN: Or did you look toward European art?

RAPHAEL SOYER: Yeah, well, I began to look very early toward European artists. In 1920s. In the 1920s, Moses got a fellowship, a scholarship, at the Educational Alliance, and he went to Paris and he stayed there for about two years. And he sent me the. . . .

MILTON BROWN: Oh, what year was that?

RAPHAEL SOYER: [to another person:] What year was Moses in. . . .

REBECCA:: '25 to '27.

MILTON BROWN: Oh, uh huh.

RAPHAEL SOYER: [No doubt], yes. And he sent me a book on Degas, and I still have it. It's one of my precious books. And, you know, I was always more interested in the more psychological art. I mean, artists with a kind of psychological bent.

MILTON BROWN: Uh huh.

RAPHAEL SOYER: I liked very much the portraits of Thomas Eakins. Very much. And Degas, because he reminded me. . . . Who's. . . . I mean, if he were a writer he'd be like. . . . Well, if he were a writer, I mean, he could be something like one of those Russian writers.

MILTON BROWN: Uh huh.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Such a psychological element in his work, an element of psychology.

MILTON BROWN: Yes.

RAPHAEL SOYER: And I consider myself kind of a guy of three cultures. Let's say the Jewish culture, Russian culture, and American culture.

MILTON BROWN: Um hmm.

RAPHAEL SOYER: So that. . . . And Russian culture remained very deeply within me because when I was a child and like certain children in Russia would read everything their father read. I mean, I read everything my father had, in his library. Well, when I came to this country, when Moses and I came to this country, we knew all the American classics, like Turgenev and Chekov, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy.

MILTON BROWN: You mean Russian classics.

RAPHAEL SOYER: In Russian, Russian classics. And also we, when we were very, very young, our father would read to us Russian translations of Americans, like Mark Twain's The Prince and the Pauper, you know. Such books he would read to us. I knew Uncle Tom's Cabin by heart. I knew it by heart. I read it so many times in Russian.

MILTON BROWN: James Fenimore Cooper? James Fenimore Cooper was popular.

RAPHAEL SOYER: No, not so much. No, I never read anything by. . . .

MILTON BROWN: About Indians, they were. Well, my uncle who was about your age. . . . No, he's older. But he remembers James Fenimore Cooper and the stories about the Indians.

RAPHAEL SOYER: No, no, I don't remember.

MILTON BROWN: No, um hmm.

RAPHAEL SOYER: I know that the Indians were very popular. Don't think I know it from a story by Chekov, about two boys going to run away and very much influenced by the American Indian stories, something like that.

MILTON BROWN: Well, in the twenties were you reading American literature then?

RAPHAEL SOYER: In the twenties? Well, I was reading the. . . . When I was young I read a lot of poetry like Shelley, Keats. Poetry, but what else I don't remember now.

MILTON BROWN: I was interested because in the twenties Burchfield was very influenced by Sherwood Anderson's Winesberg, Ohio. . . . It had a great effect on him, and they were all reading Sinclair Lewis and. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: Well, we read that, yes. Well, you know, I read Winesberg, Ohio, and I read Theodore Dreiser. Several books by Theodore Dreiser. And let's see, what else? I don't remember who else we read in those day. [directing question toward Rebecca].

REBECCA: Mike Gold.

MILTON BROWN: Mike Gold. [laughing] In the thirties, not in the twenties.

REBECCA: Jews Without Money.

MILTON BROWN: Jews Without Money, that's right. It was one of the first of the immigrant novels that a young man who came to this country as an immigrant boy wrote.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Yeah. I remember also I read a book by this [Abecan, Abcan].

MILTON BROWN: [_____—Ed.] [Abecan, Abcan]. That was a very famous. . . .

REBECCA: The Rise of somebody Levinsky.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Yes, and I was impressed by that book I remember.

REBECCA: The Rise of David Levinsky.

RAPHAEL SOYER: I read that, and, well, I must have read a number of books. I read Upton Sinclair. Upton Sinclair and also the other Sinclair.

MILTON BROWN: Lewis.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Yes, I read his books, yes. I know his work pretty well. And, well, they were popular. They were very famous in those days and everybody read them, you know, Main Street, and Babbit and so on. Burchfield you mentioned, and I remember one of the very first exhibitions of Burchfield, and certainly it was like Sinclair Lewis. Those old streets.

REBECCA: We read William Dean Howells.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Yeah. I remember him, Howells. So in other words, we read what everybody else read.

MILTON BROWN: Yeah, that's, I think you're. . . . So that whatever. . . . And it's interesting, for instance, I've been reading recently about Burchfield, and Burchfield was very interested in Russian literature, so. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: He was?

MILTON BROWN: He was.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Burchfield?

MILTON BROWN: He read Russian literature. As a matter of fact, he was influenced by a Russian illustrator. I forget the man's name. He had a book of this man's illustrations, so the mixture of culture is. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: That's news to me. That's news to me. I never knew that.

MILTON BROWN: I think it's very interesting.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Burchfield.

MILTON BROWN: So in a sense you never did anything but art. How did you make a living? Well, you worked a little on the side and then you went to art school.

RAPHAEL SOYER: I worked in some part-time jobs and so on, yes.

MILTON BROWN: And you lived with your family at that time.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Well, yes, I lived a long time with my family.

MILTON BROWN: When did you get married?

RAPHAEL SOYER: Till I married Rebecca.

REBECCA: Thirty-one.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Fifty years ago.

REBECCA: We just celebrated out golden anniversary.

MILTON BROWN: But up to that time. . . . And then you made a living at art or what did. . . . Rebecca, were you working then?

RAPHAEL SOYER: She was. . . .

REBECCA: Teaching.

MILTON BROWN: In grade school? Kindergarten?

RAPHAEL SOYER: Nursery school and kindergarten, but not in the public school system. Private school.

MILTON BROWN: Oh, private school.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Rebecca helped me an awful lot. If not for her, I don't know what would have happened. Because those times were very grave, very. But after my second one-man show—the second at Daniel. . . . After my, either the first or second exhibition at the Valentine Gallery. . . . Daniel Galleries failed. I had a show there, and it failed. And that's an interesting story, you know, because I took several of my paintings and went from gallery to gallery. And all the galleries said, "Well, leave them here. Keep them here and we'll see." But then I said, "I'll go to one more gallery," or something like that, and I went to the Valentine Gallery and he immediately bought four of my paintings for $500. In those days it was a lot of money to me.

MILTON BROWN: Was that Kurt Valentine?

RAPHAEL SOYER: No, it was Valentine Dudensing. . . .

MILTON BROWN: Valentine Dudensing. Was it called the Valentine Gallery?

RAPHAEL SOYER: Valentine Gallery. He had exhibited only several American painters. Milton Avery, myself,

Elshemius, and Kane. Kane?

MILTON BROWN: John Kane.

RAPHAEL SOYER: These were the Americans. But the rest were. . . . In those days, I would pull out of the racks paintings by Degas, paintings that are famous today. Paintings by Modigliani, Soutine. He had all those paintings there. And when I had my second—either the first exhibition or second—at the Valentine Gallery, the Art Students League invited me to teach there. And that was during the Depression. That was in the thirties. So that I was not eligible for the WPA.

MILTON BROWN: Oh, because you were teaching?

RAPHAEL SOYER: Rebecca worked, and I had the job at the League.

MILTON BROWN: Oh, yeah. So you were never on WPA?

RAPHAEL SOYER: I was not on WPA, but later on they kind of tried to resuscitate it. It somehow was dying or something happened, and they invited artists who were not on WPA to kind of. . . .

MILTON BROWN: I think what they were trying at one point was to upgrade it. There were people who were saying that there were no worthwhile artists on WPA. It was only the people who were no good so they. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: Oh, there were plenty worthwhile artists.

MILTON BROWN: That's right. Well, then they invited people. Like John Sloan was on for a while.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Yeah, I did some etchings for them. I did some etchings for them. Several etchings, for awhile. I want to add something: In a sense those were difficult times, but artistically they were less confusing times, less confusing. There were not so many different directions in art, and the artists, I think, got more of a hearing from the critics. There were more newspapers with people who wrote on art. There weren't these jazzed up reputations. I mean, the artists were not so-called celebrities in those days. They were known, but they were not so-called celebrities. And it was in a sense, when I look back to those days, it was something more, well, a little bit more honest I think, as far as art is concerned.

MILTON BROWN: Well, if you remember, it certainly seemed to be more active, because there were, first of all, many more newspapers in those days.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Yes.

MILTON BROWN: And there many people who were writing. There were also many magazines that were writing about contemporary art.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Yes. And they were all more modest in a sense. There were certain modest qualities about those art magazines in those days. Not (again, I must use the word) "jazzed" up as in art magazines today, you know, like the Art News. All these colored reproductions and so on.

MILTON BROWN: Yeah, well. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: You know, there were fewer museums in those days. There were fewer art galleries in those days. There were fewer artists in those days. I mean it was simpler and less confusing in those days.

MILTON BROWN: More intimate.

RAPHAEL SOYER: More intimate, yes, that's a good word, I guess.

MILTON BROWN: And more or less centered around Greenwich Village and 14th, Union Square.

RAPHAEL SOYER: More around there, yeah.

MILTON BROWN: Now what I think is interesting historically is that, aside from the fact that there was a Depression—which had, you know the Crash in '29—and we remember the early years. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: After the crash, yes.

MILTON BROWN: . . . of the Depression, which were very difficult, there were people who thought the revolution was around the corner, and there would be barricades in Union Square. And you remember when the police charged into crowds.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Oh, yes, yes. Well, yes. That was, that was later on.

MILTON BROWN: Well, I can remember ‘30 and ‘31, when I was going to college, we used to march in May Day parades and we used to demonstrate.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Oh, yeah. Yes.

MILTON BROWN: But aside from that—we’ll come back later to the nature of the Depression—but when you read about those days, it seems that there was a crystallization of the notion of American art as kind of. . . . People became conscious of American art as American art—possibly because the very famous artists of Europe were beginning to make such a stir and they were beginning to sell here. All the new, more radical, artists like Picasso and Matisse and Braque, and then the Dadaists and the Surrealists were coming in. And there was a feeling after the war, through the twenties—it was a growing feeling through the twenties—that American art was coming into its own, was looking for an American subject matter, and there was a lot of talk about American art coming of age. And I think you probably remember in the magazines in those days there were many articles about. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: Well, whom or who do you mean?

MILTON BROWN: Well, someone like Peyton Boswell. Remember Peyton Boswell. He used to write editorials.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Well, I remember when, as far as I remember, I mean personally. . . .

MILTON BROWN: Yeah.

RAPHAEL SOYER: I remember when people like Bellows, George Bellows. . . . Well, George Bellows especially, but people of that group, you know: Bellows, Luks. . . . They had an influence upon the younger artists in those days. I mean to me Bellows in those days was somewhat of a hero.

MILTON BROWN: Um hmm.

RAPHAEL SOYER: I considered him a great artist. And we talked about them. There was a living influence somehow in the Academy—the younger artists. But also when I was at the Academy there were already some Cézannists, people who were very much, were talking a lot about Cézanne, and they actually painted curved kind of still lifes with tilted tables, you know, and so on. Or the portraits with the drapes in the background, you know. At the very same time. They were aware already of the great art of Europe. And also, we were aware of what was happening in this country. I mean, those people like Bellows and Sloan, they were kind of influential in those days. They influenced young artists. But personally I was very soon taken with people like Degas. I loved his work—somehow.
And I attribute it to the element of, not so much of the quality of painting in Degas—or even drawing in Degas, which is so great—but somehow I fell for this element of understanding of the human psyche, you know, that I see in Degas. I see it to this day.

MILTON BROWN: I suppose what you mean is that inherent in any Degas painting there is a dramatic content, an interrelationship between the people or a single person that’s represented. It isn’t just, let’s say, a surface rendering.

RAPHAEL SOYER: No, I think it’s more profound, somehow. I think that in that entire group, he was the one who influenced me because of that element in him. Of the profundity of the insight of the human soul—of psyche, I would say.

MILTON BROWN: Yes.

RAPHAEL SOYER: You see, Cézanne is Cézanne, you know, but he never influenced me. Never could influence me.

MILTON BROWN: No.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Then a lot of times they’re so wonderful, and at times it’s very sweet. I was also a great admirer of Courbet and Corot. I loved these great artists. And they are so, so representational, too, you know, so. . . . There’s such an accuracy in their work, which I like very much. Eakins, you know. . . .

MILTON BROWN: Well, you must have been conscious of the younger generation of Europeans like Matisse and Picasso.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Yes, but they never. . . . Oh, I was aware of them, certainly.

MILTON BROWN: Yeah.

RAPHAEL SOYER: I was very much aware of them, but somehow they never captured me, captivated me.

MILTON BROWN: Right.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Of course I became, I also. . . . All this Abstract Expressionism here, all these Abstract Expressionists were my contemporaries, my age.

MILTON BROWN: Yes.

RAPHAEL SOYER: By the way, you heard that Shanker died.

MILTON BROWN: Yeah, Louis Shanker. I just saw it.

RAPHAEL SOYER: They're passing away, one after another. And I knew them very well. I knew them when they were young.

MILTON BROWN: Did you know them? Well, they didn't go to the Academy.

RAPHAEL SOYER: No, not the Academy, no. I knew them from other places. Some of them went to the Educational Alliance.

MILTON BROWN: Uh huh.

RAPHAEL SOYER: And later on I knew them. I knew Jackson Pollack. I knew, of course, Arshile Gorky. I knew him very well. I liked Arshile Gorky most, because he seemed to be the most poetic of them.

MILTON BROWN: I was always interested. Why did he take the name of Gorky?

RAPHAEL SOYER: I can't understand it.

MILTON BROWN: He was not a Russian.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Certainly not, no.

MILTON BROWN: No. He didn't talk Russian to you?

RAPHAEL SOYER: No.

MILTON BROWN: Did he know any Russian?

RAPHAEL SOYER: No. No.

MILTON BROWN: Oh. But he used to hang around I think with Burliuk, and you, and Moses.

RAPHAEL SOYER: And this other one, what's his name again? John Graham. He was also a Russian. His name was Dubrovski.

MILTON BROWN: Yeah, he was a Russian. I didn't know him at all.

RAPHAEL SOYER: I knew him. I knew Graham.

MILTON BROWN: Strange man.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Yes, a very strange man, yeah. Yes, he was very strange.

MILTON BROWN: He had very strange theories about art.

RAPHAEL SOYER: He had strange theories. He was also. . . .

MILTON BROWN: And thought himself a Marxist, didn't he?

RAPHAEL SOYER: I don't think a Marxist, no. I think he was the one who was always somewhat of a dealer. He used to sell African sculpture.

MILTON BROWN: Oh?

RAPHAEL SOYER: Yes. He was a very sophisticated person. For his time he was very knowledgeable and very sophisticated. Didn't he write a book or something?

MILTON BROWN: I thought he was a Marxist because he always talked about dialectics.

RAPHAEL SOYER: [chuckles] I don't know. He used to talk about other things too. I can't really remember. But he was a good friend of Arshile Gorky. I think Gorky was, may have been influenced by him, or he was influenced by Gorky. At one time they made these imaginary heads, you know.

MILTON BROWN: Well, he did, he was influenced by. . . . In the twenties, he and Matulka had been in Europe. Jan Matulka. I think you knew him. He taught at the league, didn't he?

RAPHAEL SOYER: I don't know, but he was in the Academy. When I came to the National Academy he was one of the famous students—ex-students—of the Academy. A large portrait, several large Sargentesque portraits by Matulka were hanging on the walls. He was a very skillful painter and a very. . . . I remember, he'd come later on, not as a student, and the students had great respect for him. More respect than they had for the teachers.

MILTON BROWN: Well, Dorothy Dehner told me when she and David were—David Smith—were at the Art Students League they were students of Jan Matulka in the twenties.

RAPHAEL SOYER: They were students of Matulka? Could be. Oh yes, I think Smith was a student of Matulka. Yes.

MILTON BROWN: And of course, Matulka and Graham were influenced by Picasso's synthetic cubism, and that's. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: I think Matulka was.

MILTON BROWN: Yeah. And it seemed to have influenced Gorky at that point, sort of the end of the twenties.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Yeah. I remember Matulka just before he died . . . he was an old, sick man. And no gallery would take up his work. I tried to interest my own gallery in his work. And they came and they looked at the painting and they wouldn't, wouldn't. Later on he had an exhibition at the Schoelkopf Gallery.

MILTON BROWN: Oh, of the American artists of that time, who did you think highly of? Did you know Hopper's work then?

RAPHAEL SOYER: Well, Hopper's work I got to know through Alex.

MILTON BROWN: Alex who?

RAPHAEL SOYER: Alex Brook was at that time some kind of a, he had some kind of a job at the Whitney Studio Club. And he would arrange exhibitions, and I think there was an exhibition of Hopper. And I remember how. . . . Yes, I knew Hopper then.

Tape 1, side B

MILTON BROWN: May fifteenth, side 2. You were talking about the exhibition of Hopper.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Yes. I remember there was an exhibition of Hopper at the Whitney Studio Club, and, well, I was very, really very naive, I mean, when I look back, I was kind of very humble. I mean it's very naive. I had respect, and I admired everybody. I admired in those days Alexander Brook, for instance. He was very well known in those days and very successful in those days. Of course, I always had, have great respect for Yasuo Kuniyoshi. He seemed to me a very talented artist. I don't know, I somehow admired his talent. I couldn't understand why, but there's something in his work that I admire.

MILTON BROWN: He was kind of precocious, you know, that. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: Very talented, and a kind of a strange talent. And Alex Brook was very brilliant in those days. I mean, he was very much liked. He got all the prizes. He got all the. . . . Whenever there was an exhibition in those days his pictures were always reproduced. And I had terrific respect for him. And he helped to sell my very first painting. He's the one who got me into the Whitney Studio Club, and. . . .

MILTON BROWN: When was that?

RAPHAEL SOYER: That was I think in the late twenties. And Mrs. Force would buy my pictures occasionally. She would come. . . . I would be at the Club and bring in a small painting, and, you know, I used to work weekends, and I would bring a painting. And Mrs. Force would come down from someplace. She would say, "How much do you want for this, Mr. Soyer?" I'd say, "A hundred dollars." And she wouldn't say a word, and she would give me a hundred dollars.
Once when I worked a long time, many weekends, on a certain painting, Street Scene, I brought it, she said,

“How much do you want for it?” And so I said, “Two hundred dollars.” [mildly chuckling] And she gave me two hundred dollars. And that was a big thing to me. I felt great encouragement. I knew that my paintings are already worth something. I mean, people actually buy them. And Alex Brook was able to sell my very first painting. He saw my very first painting at the salon exhibition, American Salon. There used to be an exhibition. And I sent a little street scene that I painted from the window in the Bronx. I still was living in the Bronx with my parents. And, well, Brook saw that, and he got in touch with me and he was able to sell it, and it got me into the Whitney Studio Club.

MILTON BROWN: Um hmm. What about the, we didn’t mention Eugene Speicher. At that time Speicher was one of the big. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: Yeah. I never had anything to do with Speicher. I mean, he was a big man in those days.

MILTON BROWN: Yeah. You were mentioning people that were big names. And Speicher must have influenced Brook, didn’t he?

RAPHAEL SOYER: I don’t think so.

MILTON BROWN: No?

RAPHAEL SOYER: Not Sp eicher. No, Brook was kind of a. . . . Well, Brook also talked in terms of French art, of Courbet. Such artists. I don’t think that Speicher, he wasn’t in Speicher’s group. As a matter of fact, Brook was quite a brilliant fellow, you know. Very much liked in those days, very much admired in those days, and. . . . He and Niles Spencer. Do you know him?

MILTON BROWN: Yeah.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Although they were very unlike one another, you know, they were very good friends.

MILTON BROWN: Oh, they were good friends?

RAPHAEL SOYER: Very good friends. Niles drank an awful lot. Brook too in those days, but Niles drank more. And finally I think became an alcoholic. He was an alcoholic. He was quiet man and Brook was a very flamboyant man, you know, completely different people.
Somebody told me a very interesting, funny anecdote, interesting anecdote about them too. Brook, as I said before, was very flamboyant, outgoing and so on, and he would come into the Lafayette Hotel. There was a restaurant there, and the waiters knew him and they liked him. He came in drunk one day, one morning or something like that, and he took his hat and threw it out of the window. And the waiters immediately rushed out to bring him back his hat. And so the next day Niles Spencer came, you know, this quiet Niles Spencer, and he kind of tried to imitate Alex Brook, and threw his hat out, but nobody went to rescue his hat and he had to go and get it himself.

MILTON BROWN: [laughing]

RAPHAEL SOYER: But they were nice people, you know. I liked very much Niles Spencer. He was very silent and gentle. And Brook _____ according to him Niles Spencer couldn’t draw. He just did those houses. And he did figures. And today I think Niles Spencer is somehow more, more admired than Alex Brook.

MILTON BROWN: Yeah. Well, Niles Spencer belonged for a while to that group that we call the precisionists. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: Yeah, like Sheeler] and Demuth.

MILTON BROWN: . . . .and he was really a rather elegant artist.

RAPHAEL SOYER: I never met Demuth. Although they used to exhibit at the Daniel Galleries. I never met Preston Dickinson. He died very young.

MILTON BROWN: Did you know Elsie Driggs?

RAPHAEL SOYER: Elsie, no. I met her recently, someplace.

MILTON BROWN: Yeah, because she was a youngster who also. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: She was with the Daniel Galleries.

MILTON BROWN: They were showing that kind of. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: Yes, yes, precisionist painting.

MILTON BROWN: . . . precisionist painting. So really you were a little unusual for Daniel to handle.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Yeah, I was unusual for Daniel. They liked my work.

MILTON BROWN: Yeah.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Yes, they liked my. . . . Well, as I say, you know, Kuniyoshi was with them at this time.

MILTON BROWN: Uh huh. Um hmm.

RAPHAEL SOYER: And Pascin was with them in those days.

MILTON BROWN: Oh, that's interesting. I meant to ask. . . . I mean, you have Pascins, and I always know you admired [_____—Ed.] Pascin.

RAPHAEL SOYER: I love his drawings. I loved the way he drew, and, of course, I mean Pascin was quite an influence. He was in this country in those days, in the late 1920s.

MILTON BROWN: Yeah. Yeah, I think he had a remarkable influence on. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: And he was with the Daniel Galleries. And, let's see now, he once saw one of my paintings at the Daniel Galleries, and he expressed a desire to meet me. He liked it. I was supposed to meet him, but I got cold feet in those days and I never went to see him.

MILTON BROWN: You were shy?

RAPHAEL SOYER: I was shy. I never saw him.

MILTON BROWN: And you never met him?

RAPHAEL SOYER: Never met him, no. Everybody else knew him; I never met him. Everybody else, Brook and_____.

MILTON BROWN: I thought everybody, I thought you certainly met him.

RAPHAEL SOYER: No, I never met him. I had this opportunity, but then. . . . As I said, I was very kind of, well, alienated. I don't know. I really was. Even when I painted. . . .

MILTON BROWN: You were shy?

RAPHAEL SOYER: Even when I was with the Daniel Galleries. I regret it very much. But anyhow. . . .

MILTON BROWN: Rebecca must have had to run after you. [laughs]

REBECCA: [laughs] Well, I had an advantage, because his sister was a friend of mine. We were classmates.

MILTON BROWN: Oh, oh.

REBECCA: So I was there.

MILTON BROWN: Hamish, huh.

RAPHAEL SOYER: She would come to the house at that time, yeah.

REBECCA: I was there.

RAPHAEL SOYER: I avoided her.

MILTON BROWN: You avoided her?

REBECCA: As a matter of fact, you know I really fell in love with? His father.

MILTON BROWN: Oh. [laughs]

REBECCA: He was wonderful.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Pascin in those days was a big influence—and Alex Brook, Peggy Bacon, Boucher, Kuniyoshi.

They were all influenced by Pascin.

MILTON BROWN: You were, too?

RAPHAEL SOYER: I got my very first models because I was influenced by Pascin. I used to paint street scenes.

MILTON BROWN: When you did models, in the twenties they looked like Pascin.

RAPHAEL SOYER: In those days, yes. Later I changed.

MILTON BROWN: Yeah.

RAPHAEL SOYER: But I was in the beginning influenced by Pascin.

MILTON BROWN: And you never met him.

RAPHAEL SOYER: No.

MILTON BROWN: Fascinating. Did you know Emil Ganso?

RAPHAEL SOYER: Yes, I knew Ganso.

MILTON BROWN: But they were very friendly.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Oh, yes. Oh, they were very. . . . I mean Ganso was Pascin, or tried to be like Pascin. But of course he didn't have the quality of Pascin. . . .

MILTON BROWN: No.

RAPHAEL SOYER: . . . but he drew like. . . . I mean, he drew the models, he drew in the same positions, and so on.

MILTON BROWN: I think they used to like to go out whoring together, too.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Maybe. He died very young.

MILTON BROWN: Yeah, Pascin.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Not really. Ganso.

MILTON BROWN: Ganso went out. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: Ganso died in his forties.

MILTON BROWN: But he went out to Iowa, and he was. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: That's where he died. He died there.

MILTON BROWN: Yeah. The fresh air must have killed him.

RAPHAEL SOYER: That's the first obituary I ever saw on an artist. The first obituary about an artist I read.

MILTON BROWN: Um hmm.

RAPHAEL SOYER: And that was when Ganso died.

MILTON BROWN: Well, let's take a, well, take another tack, you know, about the thirties now. The thirties are coming back into fashion, as this. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: Yeah, I know that.

MILTON BROWN: Everybody wants to do thirties shows now.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Yes, yes.

MILTON BROWN: So there's a kind of reexamination of the thirties. I think it would be interesting to talk about the thirties.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Well, I just saw today, the other day, on the cover of Arts magazine, also a street scene by

Adolph Gottlieb. They all painted, in those days, they painted kind of realistically.

MILTON BROWN: Yeah, Adolph Gottlieb especially. He was very good, I thought.

RAPHAEL SOYER: And as a matter of fact. . . .

MILTON BROWN: Did Rothko paint like that?

RAPHAEL SOYER: I think Adolph Gottlieb had more, he had a nicer quality. You know, he had more color sense. Somehow seemed to be the more talented man. I remember when Shanker and Gottlieb had the studio together, somewhere on the east side. And, well, they painted life. I mean, they painted, they were not geniuses yet. I mean, nobody could consider them geniuses.

MILTON BROWN: Yeah.

RAPHAEL SOYER: They became geniuses when they became Abstract Expressionists. Overnight, strangely enough. And, as I said, the thirties now. . . . I painted my parents in those days. That was the influence of Buy Pene duBois. He told me to paint. . . . You know, when I was at the Academy, my great desire was to be able to paint like William Merritt Chase or like John Singer Sargent. They all talked about those artists. Later on about Bellows and so on, but, you know, as I said before, there were already some Cézannists in those days in the Academy. I learned very quickly to paint a la Sargent, you know. When I first came to the Academy it seemed to me "How wonderful!" you know. The students seem to me like like geniuses, you know. I was just a beginner. I considered myself a beginner. And here they were. They were making portraits. . . . I mean, they had so much technique that I thought that they were wonderful. But very soon I realized that just to be able to paint with dexterity and to copy faces and so on is not really art. I really understood that after a while. And then when I went to Guy Pene duBois, he said, "Why don't you paint simpler. I mean, he told me to "Paint your house, paint your parents, paint your brothers and sisters," and that's what I did. I painted my mother many, many times. I painted even my grandmother. You know, she would sit under those big rubber plants, you know, like in Henri Rousseau painting?

MILTON BROWN: Yeah.

RAPHAEL SOYER: And I began to paint differently and different subject matter. I painted my parents, my brothers, my sisters, and my mother. And I still have a painting here that I did of my mother in 1927, and I think it's as good as anything I do today. But those landscapes, those street scenes, I like those things.

MILTON BROWN: Yes, I think the street scenes are. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: To me they're good pictures.

MILTON BROWN: . . . .good pictures. They're very interesting.

RAPHAEL SOYER: But that was the thirties, and. . . .

MILTON BROWN: Of course, we remember nowadays. . . . Well, we always think of the thirties as the Depression, poverty, unemployment, radical activities, all sorts of things going on, a period of turmoil. Also, what was happening in Europe at that time was frightening. The rise of Nazism and Fascism in the thirties had an effect. So we have a tendency to think of the thirties only as a political period.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Yeah, well as far as the Depression is concerned, I never had anything to lose in those days, and the Depression did not impress me. The only thing was that the gallery failed, the Daniel Gallery. But very soon I got another gallery. I mean, artistically I didn't feel the Depression very much. I mean, I had this job at the Art Students League and Rebecca worked.

MILTON BROWN: Yes.

RAPHAEL SOYER: What I mean, we weren't poor. We weren't poor. As I said before, you know, I had nothing to lose in the Depression, so I didn't feel it very much. And as far as what happened politically, I became a member of the John Reed Club. That was a club of writers and artists, leftists, all, and I think Rebecca influenced me very much. She was more aware of the politics. She was more aware than I. And I still look back to this John Reed Club as a great kind of, for me it was a great education. Nikolai Cikorsky indoctrinated me into the John Reed Club, and. . . . Well, there I knew what was taking place, all the unrest all over the place, the beginning of Nazism that you mentioned, and the advance of Communism, all those things, you know. And I became aware of those things. And that was my political education, the John Reed Club, the John Reed Club for Artists and Writers. There were a number of writers, there were a number of artists and. . . . And what's his name again? William Gropper. Joe Jones. Philip Bard. A number of these people. And they were all left and all young in those days. And I came there completely as a novice. I didn't know much about it. Rebecca knew much more what was

taking place.

MILTON BROWN: Walter Quirt was. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: Walter Quirt was there. Oh, yeah, Walter Quirt was a very efficient little, like a little official, you know. A very efficient little guy. I was very friendly with Walter. I painted his portrait.

MILTON BROWN: Oh, you did?

RAPHAEL SOYER: Oh, yes. I taught at the Art Students League.

MILTON BROWN: Yeah.

RAPHAEL SOYER: They got me a job to teach there. And there too I was, I was very quiet and very shy, you know. The other people were very talkative, very, very loud, you know. They were, they talked about revolution and about that sort of thing. Jacob Kainin I remember. You know Jacob?

MILTON BROWN: Yeah, he's in Washington now.

RAPHAEL SOYER: He's in Washington, yes. I still see him occasionally.

MILTON BROWN: Yeah, I see him there. But there was a friend of Walter Quirt's, James Guy?

RAPHAEL SOYER: Oh, God, yeah, James Gee, I forgot about him.

MILTON BROWN: He's apparently still living in Connecticut.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Is he?

MILTON BROWN: Sort of totally forgotten. Was Stuart Davis. . . ?

RAPHAEL SOYER: Stuart Davis was not at the John Reed Club. I don't remember him, but he was a member of the Artists' Congress.

MILTON BROWN: Yeah.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Very strong and active member of the Artists' Congress.

MILTON BROWN: He was also with Art Front. Now Art Front was. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: Art Front was with the John Reed Club, I'm sure.

MILTON BROWN: I think he was the editor.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Was he? I don't know.

MILTON BROWN: I think he was very active.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Ben Shahn was very active at Art Front, I think.

MILTON BROWN: His wife, his second wife.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Oh, his wife was a militant. Bernarda was a militant, absolutely militant. She was one of the early picketers, you know. And she picketed the Whitney Studio Club or the Whitney Museum, I don't remember which. But I remember, talking about picketing, we. . . . We picketed—I among them—the Whitney Club because they don't exhibit the Abstract Expressionists. See? We thought the Whitney should exhibit Abstract Expressionists. There was picketing.

MILTON BROWN: Abstract Expressionists? Not the. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: Should exhibit at the Whitney. . . .

MILTON BROWN: Abstract art.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Huh? Abstract Expressionists were not exhibited. . . .

MILTON BROWN: Oh, I see.

RAPHAEL SOYER: . . . were not being exhibited at the Whitney.

MILTON BROWN: Um hmm.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Museum, I think it was or club. . . .

MILTON BROWN: Yeah.

RAPHAEL SOYER: I don't remember just what. And we picketed in favor of the Abstract Expressionists. They should be given a chance. And I was among the picketers.

MILTON BROWN: I see.

RAPHAEL SOYER: We also picketed, I remember, the John D. Rockefeller when the Rivera murals were destroyed. Now that's a very interesting thing in the thirties, and that's when the John Reed Club was very active, that was when the Mexican painters had a great influence upon Americans and American art.

MILTON BROWN: Yes.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Rivera and Siqueiros, especially. Rivera was very famous here, I think. The Museum of Modern Art gave him a big exhibition. And then Siqueiros came and they made a big fuss here, you know. They had an energetic quality, you know, and influenced many. But I didn't like Siqueiros. Not personally, but I don't like his behavior, I mean his flamboyance, I mean this energy somehow.

MILTON BROWN: You mean Siqueiros. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: I liked Rivera much more than Siqueiros. I liked Rivera very much. I made many sketches of Rivera while he was painting. Later on at the New Workers' School [The New School for Social Work—Ed.], you know, they destroyed his mural? I would come to the School on Fourteenth Street, and he would paint in the evenings, and I would make drawings of him.

MILTON BROWN: Yeah, I remember seeing him paint there.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Yeah, he even spoke a little Russian.

MILTON BROWN: Oh, that's right. He had been in Russia at one point, huh?

RAPHAEL SOYER: That's right, Russia, yes, yes. And I remember also that very famous event at the John Reed Club, and Rivera was considered a renegade or a Trotskyite of something.

MILTON BROWN: Yeah.

RAPHAEL SOYER: And the John Reed Club members berated him.

MILTON BROWN: It's when he was influential in getting Trotsky into Mexico, I suppose.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Yes. Oh, yes. It was a terrible evening, you know. I sympathized with Rivera. I didn't understand why all this anger at him, you know, why they were so angry at Rivera. I found among our books one by an artist about Rivera in the twenties and thirties. And it's fascinating. It's about those days.

MILTON BROWN: Oh, I'd like to see it.

RAPHAEL SOYER: I'll give it to you if you want to read it.

MILTON BROWN: I'd like to look at it because a student of mine just finished a dissertation on Frieda Kahlo. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: She mentioned Frieda Kahlo, yeah.

MILTON BROWN: . . . Rivera's wife, and it's all about this period, how when they were in this country, and. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: Yeah, this artist was in Mexico, and she mentions. . . . Kahlo?

MILTON BROWN: Kahlo.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Kahlo, yeah. She was an interesting painter. . . .

MILTON BROWN: Did you know her?

RAPHAEL SOYER: No.

MILTON BROWN: She was around with Rivera.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Yes, yes.

MILTON BROWN: I remember when. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: Yeah, I did some drawings of her. I mean, with Rivera. Rivera painting murals and. . . .

MILTON BROWN: And she was sitting there?

RAPHAEL SOYER: . . . and she was standing there. Well, everybody painted murals in those days, and a la Rivera. I even posed for a mural painting. A guy painted a mural. . . . I still remember his name, Noda. He was Japanese, and he painted. . . . Like Rivera, you know, he painted portraits in his murals. He put my portrait in his mural. But they painted themselves in the murals, just like Rivera did. Tried to imitate Rivera's composition and Rivera's technique and so on. He was a great influence.

MILTON BROWN: And Orozco also.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Well, Orozco was less known here. I don't know why. Orozco was kind of. . . .

MILTON BROWN: He was not as flamboyant as Rivera.

RAPHAEL SOYER: He was very retiring, and. . . . I saw him once. Now you mentioned retiring. I saw him once in a house. There was a meeting of artists or something—I don't remember now, a number of artists in a very fancy house. And there was Orozco sitting in the foyer. He wouldn't go into the big room. He was sitting on a bench in the foyer. He was very thin, and his collar was ragged. He was kind of raggedy. And he was sitting there with a very kind of blowsy looking woman with lots of yellow hair, just sitting there on the side, and a very sarcastic expression on his face. They never talked to him; he was sitting there all by himself. And I don't remember now what it was about. It was a whole group of artists in a certain house, and Orozco was there. He wouldn't go in to mix with the other artists.

MILTON BROWN: And it was not the Delphic Studio?

RAPHAEL SOYER: No, no. No, in a private house.

MILTON BROWN: He was involved with an Alma somebody.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Alma Reed.

MILTON BROWN: Alma Reed, that's right, yeah. And that circle, kind of mystic group.

RAPHAEL SOYER: I saw once a wonderful exhibition of his drawings someplace. Drawings. Different kind of drawings, Toulouse-Lautrec -like, of houses, soldiers, prostitutes and so on. And they were wonderful. I remember I was so impressed by that. That was way back, but I never saw them again, that kind of drawings.

MILTON BROWN: They were things he did in the twenties. Those are his early works. Since we're on muralists, when were you first conscious of Thomas Hart Benton? Did you know him at all.

RAPHAEL SOYER: No, I never was very conscious of Benton. Not of Benton. Not of Curry, or not of Wood. I met Benton, and I met Curry, and I met Wood. I met them all. Benton I met when he became a member of the Associated American Artists and if you remember there was a woman there, a very charming woman, Pegeen Sullivan.

MILTON BROWN: Yeah.

RAPHAEL SOYER: And she came with Benton to my studio, and they seduced me into joining the Associated American Artists. I left the Valentine Galleries, and Valentine was very angry that I left them.

MILTON BROWN: Why did you leave?

RAPHAEL SOYER: I still remember, he said, "What do you think? Do you think I'll jump through the ceiling?" or something like that. That was a great anger. And I joined the Associated American Artists, because they promised that at least I'll be sure of rent for my studio. They said, "We'll always see to it that you have enough money to pay for your studio." That was the Associated American Artists. And Benton came with that woman to my studio.

MILTON BROWN: Oh.

RAPHAEL SOYER: And of course with Benton, I knew Wood and Curry. They were the three pillars of American art in those days. They were the famous artists.

MILTON BROWN: You were never with ACA were you?

RAPHAEL SOYER: No, I was never with the ACA.

MILTON BROWN: No. Moses was with the ACA.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Moses was. No, I was never with the ACA. Isaac was with the Gruskin Gallery, Midtown Gallery.

MILTON BROWN: Oh, yeah.

RAPHAEL SOYER: I was never with the ACA. But I was with many galleries. I had an exhibition with the Babcock Galleries. That's where Pegeen Sullivan worked, at the Babcock Galleries. That was in the 1930s. I had an exhibition at the Rehn Galleries—of small pictures. And I had an exhibition at Weyhe Galleries, of drawings.

MILTON BROWN: Oh, yes.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Weyhe. Karl Zigrosser, do you remember him?

MILTON BROWN: Yeah. And old man Weyhe was still alive, yes.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Yes.

MILTON BROWN: They showed interesting people.

RAPHAEL SOYER: They were very interesting. You know you could go into the Weyhe Gallery and look at all those drawings by Pascin, and George Gross.

MILTON BROWN: And he had also German expressionists. He had marvelous paintings.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Oh, yes, he had lots of things. He had everything. Everything.

MILTON BROWN: And the prints were his big thing.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Prints and drawings, and drawings, drawings. He had portfolios of wonderful drawings in those days.

MILTON BROWN: You know, I think we did enough for today.

MAY 18, 1981
Tape 2, side A

MILTON BROWN: The second session, May 18th, 1981, Milton Brown interviewing Raphael Soyer. Raphael, at the end of the last session you said you would like to discuss some of the artists you didn't have a chance to discuss at that session.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Yes, I painted many portraits of artists. I began with John Sloan, Joseph Stella, Marsden Hartley, all these people who are gone today. I got to know them. Some of them I got to know pretty well. I visited Stella in his studio long after I painted his portrait. I visited him several times. I visited John Sloan several times after I finished the portrait. And I painted Edward Hopper, with whom we were quite friendly. My wife and I were very friendly with him. I painted Reginald Marsh and some of the younger artists.
But I would like to talk more about these older people like Hopper, like Marsden Hartley, like John Sloan.

MILTON BROWN: I think it would be very interesting.

RAPHAEL SOYER: They were artists. Their studios were very simple studios. They were known. They were well known. But they were not celebrities. They didn't have these jazzed up reputations that it is possible to acquire today. In a sense, they were quite humble people. They never made a big to-do about themselves. They worked steadily in their very modest studios.
I remember I was in the studio of Edwin Dickinson, and it was such a nice, clean modest studio, just like his paintings were, a certain accuracy about his studio and it somehow gave me a feeling of the work, of his paintings. And, of course, the studio of Hopper was always very severe and no decorations on the walls at all, no paintings on the wall, just a big old printing press. And on the handle of the printing press was his hat always hanging. But that's about all. His wife's studio, which was the opposite room, facing south, I think, was filled with paintings, with her paintings of her limited world, you know: cats, potbellied stoves, some still lifes, and so on.

But Hopper's studio was always very austere and nothing to be seen there. In other words, I would ask Hopper, are you painting today? And after thinking for a long time he would say, "Well, I am worried like hell. I haven't yet started a painting this year." Something. . . .

MILTON BROWN: Um hmm.

RAPHAEL SOYER: And we were very friendly with the Hoppers, especially. But I always had a great feeling for those people, like Sloan, Hopper, Marsden Hartley. George Biddle was another one. And they were so erudite too. They were quite intellectual, all of them. But they never made a fuss about their. . . .

MILTON BROWN: Well, Hopper didn't like to show it, but. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: No, none of them really, none of them, no. I mean, Marsden Hartley was very knowledgeable. . . . He was poet. . . . I mean, he wrote very beautifully. But he never really talked about it, never, never showed off his poetry or his. . . .

MILTON BROWN: What was Hartley like personally?

RAPHAEL SOYER: He also impressed me as a very modest man. I mean, he was always dressed kind of shabbily, but neatly, and he always had a gardenia in his jacket. No matter what. I mean, he always had a gardenia. He was aware of the fact that he was kind of in oblivion. He was aware of it. And he once told me if he had say about sixty dollars a month—I remember that—he would be satisfied. If somebody would buy his paintings, and just if he were sure about to have sixty. . . . But that was a long time ago. That was the nineteen forties. And he also impressed me by being very modest. I mean, he wasn't your kind of showoff, or he wasn't. . . .

MILTON BROWN: Oh, he was. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: He had a very low voice, spoke in a very low voice. He posed. . . . He loved to pose, maybe because he didn't paint in those days, or he gave up painting in those days, and he wanted to spend some time just doing something else.

MILTON BROWN: Well, he was painting in the thirties. It's just that. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: In the forties.

MILTON BROWN: In the forties, too, I think. It's just that he really didn't. . . . He had been forgotten, and I think it was when Rosenberg, Pierre Rosenberg?

RAPHAEL SOYER: The Rosenberg Gallery picked him up.

MILTON BROWN: Avery and Hartley and Rattner I remember.

RAPHAEL SOYER: That's right, but that was at the very end of his life.

MILTON BROWN: That's right.

RAPHAEL SOYER: He died shortly after that.

MILTON BROWN: That's true.

RAPHAEL SOYER: You know, I did two portraits of Hartley. One portrait I did of him toothless, without teeth, and I like that portrait especially. That one I like. But then one day he came with a little package in newspaper, you know, wrapped in a newspaper, unwrapped it and took out two sets of teeth, put them in his mouth. His mouth changed. His face changed, and he said, "You know, without teeth, I look like a garbage can." That's exactly what he said. "Now you paint another portrait of me with my teeth." But I liked the other one, and when I had an exhibition of paintings of portraits—that was in 1943—I exhibited the one without the teeth, and then when I met him at his exhibition at the Rosenberg Galleries he was at that time quite flabby and quite slow, slow, walking slow, talking. . . . You know, something was the matter with him. He was heavier than when I painted him, and he said to me, "Why did you have to exhibit that toothless image of me?" That's how he put it. "Why," as if he never posed for that one.

MILTON BROWN: [chuckles] Interesting.

RAPHAEL SOYER: That was Marsden Hartley.

MILTON BROWN: Joseph Stella was a totally different type.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Joseph Stella was kind of very aggressive, very loud and very. . . . Spoke like an orator, whatever he said. He used four letter words, but loudly and kind of. . . . Well, like as if he were talking to a public, you know. And he had terrible grudges against people like Speicher and so on who were very influential in those days, whose recommendation he had to ask for in order to apply for some kind of a grant or something like that. You see? That was Stella. And Stella, I'll never forget, I mean, long after I painted his portrait—I mean, months after I painted—I came to his studio one day. He had the studio on East 14th Street, and it was on the north side of the street. I still remember it. Well, I can't forget that visit. I came in, and he was dressed in rags. I mean, just as if nobody ever visits him. I mean, actually very. . . . It's indescribable how he was dressed, and he was sitting with his back toward me eating from a big dish, eating I guess it was minestrone or something. And then he was very confused and said to me, "Listen, I don't have to change my clothes, you know. We're artists, you understand." I said, "It's okay." And I was impressed by the drabness, by the drabness of that room on 14th Street. There was a sink there filled with unwashed dishes. And then we sat down and he began to show me all his drawings, pastels, tremendous amount of pastels, you know. And some of those pastels were of flowers, very, very luxurious tropical plants and flowers. And then well, there was a bedbug crawling right in one of the. . . .

MILTON BROWN: In one of the. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: In one of the flowers. That kind of shocked and impressed me.

MILTON BROWN: Yeah.

RAPHAEL SOYER: And when I painted him he would come up to my studio he would be dressed up in a dark suit, you know. His hair was combed, and he was with a cane, you know, and he would sit down very ceremoniously, you know, in a very rickety chair, you know. And I regretted that I. . . . I said to myself, "I should have painted him here in these surroundings, you know, these kind of slimy walls, you know, with the sink in the background," and that's how I should have painted Stella. He died shortly after that, too.

MILTON BROWN: Well, he also was very badly off in the last years. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: Very. Very badly.

MILTON BROWN: . . . because his style of painting had changed completely, and in those days nobody seemed to like it.

RAPHAEL SOYER: I remember, I saw some of his exhibitions. Nobody. . . . I don't know, they were. . . . I think they were impressive, those exhibitions, I think in the _____. . . .

MILTON BROWN: Yeah, well, they're very unusual, those. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: At the ACA Gallery.

MILTON BROWN: ACA gave him a last large show.

RAPHAEL SOYER: A last show. The last show, yeah, that's right.

MILTON BROWN: It was after he died that his reputation increased somewhat.

RAPHAEL SOYER: That's right.

MILTON BROWN: There was a framer in Newark, I forget him name, who owned a lot of his pictures.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Yeah, Rayburn and Krueger.

MILTON BROWN: That's right.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Rayburn and Krueger, yes.

MILTON BROWN: And they became interested, and Shoelkopf and Zabrisky both did a drawing exhibition for which I wrote the introduction.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Yes.

MILTON BROWN: That was the first sort of big drawing show that they had, and they. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: Yes, yes. I think he was a fantastic draftsman.

MILTON BROWN: Oh, incredible.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Fantastic draftsman. I mean. . . .

MILTON BROWN: The early things, the things he did at the early part of the century. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: Yeah.

MILTON BROWN: . . . are among the best American drawings.

RAPHAEL SOYER: That's right, yeah.

MILTON BROWN: Of the miners.

RAPHAEL SOYER: The miners. They went to. . . .

MILTON BROWN: And the immigrants that came from Italy. Oh, they're marvelous.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Yeah, the immigrants, yes, all those drawings, yes, yes, yes.

MILTON BROWN: And the hunchbacked man, oh, wonderful.

RAPHAEL SOYER: All these are fantastic drawings. And he was something, I don't know, there was something of. . . . Well, I hate to say that, I mean, there was something of Mussolini in him. You know, he was kind of a very. . . .

MILTON BROWN: He was bombastic.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Bombastic, yeah. A good word, very good. And yet he was so. . . . He died so poor, unrecognized. You know, when you think of the artists of today, you know, how they live and the way he lived there on 14th Street all by himself.

MILTON BROWN: He had a wife.

RAPHAEL SOYER: He. . . . There's something he had a wife. I don't know. Also, he lived with a famous composer, modern composer, at one time.

MILTON BROWN: Varèse?

RAPHAEL SOYER: What's the name again?

MILTON BROWN: Varèse?

RAPHAEL SOYER: He lived with Varèse.

MILTON BROWN: That's right, he did.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Yeah.

MILTON BROWN: Well, a very important composer.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Yeah. And Varèse told me that every once in a while Stella would say to him. . . . Now I don't know if I should tell all those things.

MILTON BROWN: [Well I don't]. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: Stella would say to him, "You go out because somebody is coming to visit me." And Varèse suspected that nobody really came.
And I knew also John Sloan. I remember I came to his studio one day, and he was busy making a painting from one of his etchings. The etching was of two women in one of those fancy carriages on Fifth Avenue. I watched him in profile, you know. His eyes were protruding, you know, under glasses, but he was copying it very skillfully. I mean, I didn't like what he was doing, but he was doing it very skillfully. And one day I came to the studio, and Sloan complained that the man from Tate Gallery from London came to see him and he showed him his work. He said the only things that he really made favorable comments on were several earlier paintings. And those paintings, he said, "I did when I did not consider myself an artist." Sloan said that to me, "as if everything I did after that didn't count." Sloan said that.

MILTON BROWN: Yeah, well, it's unfortunate that the judgment of history on his work is that his very best work was before 1912 or thereabouts.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Yes, that's right, that's right.

MILTON BROWN: And it's true. What can you do. When he was not that self-conscious.
[Interruption in taping]

RAPHAEL SOYER: I also remember Arshile Gorky very vividly because we were very friendly for a long time. I painted his wife Agnes when she was pregnant with her first daughter. And here, at this last exhibition, I met his two girls, his two daughters. And the girl that I painted inside her mother is now about thirty-eight or thirty-nine years old. And she's an artist herself. She and her husband, who's the son of Stephen Spender, are both artists. And they live in Italy, somewhere on the outskirts of Siena.

MILTON BROWN: How did Gorky make a living in those days? Was he selling pictures?

RAPHAEL SOYER: I think that even in the days. . . . Well, I knew him a very long time, when I think he was very, very poor. I knew him then. But I didn't know him too well. But when I knew him later on, I think he had already people who kind of had great faith in him, who admired him. One of those people was the lady who wrote the book on him, the first book about Arshile Gorky. Do you know her name? I have the book here; I'll show it to you.

MILTON BROWN: Ethel Swhwabacher.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Yes. And there was another elderly woman, I remember, who was very much impressed with Gorky. I think she was the wife of a doctor or something like that. And I think the Whitney Museum was beginning to be interested in Arshile Gorky.

MILTON BROWN: I wonder, maybe Julien Levy also.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Julien Levy, that's where he had an exhibition.

MILTON BROWN: Yeah.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Yes, where he exhibited. I think that he was not that terribly poor, you know. He had a studio across the street on Union Square, across the street from where I had my studio, and he would spend a lot of time in my studio. He would come, and we'd sit down and draw. While I was painting, he would draw the people whom I was painting.

MILTON BROWN: Oh.

RAPHAEL SOYER: He did many drawings of me. Not many, many, but he did quite a few drawings of me, and I painted him several times, and I made a number of drawings of him, and. . . . I liked him. Him I liked very much, because I consider him, considered him very poetic and very kind of a. . . . He loved art. He loved art.

MILTON BROWN: He was very intense.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Very. . . . And he loved art. He loved art. He loved Degas. He could speak very well about the qualities of these artists. For instance, once he talked about Vermeer, how accurately he placed things in just the right place. He spoke about. . . . Well, of course Ingres. He loved Ingres, how all these forms that he painted in, for instance, a portrait. All the forms are separated, yet they make a very wonderful complete whole, a very wonderful complete painting. I remember he pointed out how wonderfully abstracted Degas was. To me, he talked to me.
When I painted his portrait I. . . . You know, he had very dark hair, you know. I made a shine in his hair, and he said, "The shine spoils it." And, interestingly enough, I did away with the shine and the picture improved, was improved.
Well, one day we had a long talk. We used to talk an awful lot about art. We talked on art, about art, for some time in his studio. I was there. And kind of impulsively he took out two little paintings—a self-portrait and a portrait of his sister and gave them to me. And I still have them.

MILTON BROWN: Here?

RAPHAEL SOYER: That's his sister there. And the portrait of himself is now at the Guggenheim Museum on exhibition. Also a drawing he did of Burliuk in my studio is on exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum.

MILTON BROWN: Uh huh. How about Burliuk? Very interesting man I remember, big burly Russian.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Burliuk I painted also many times. Many times. I think he was one of the most fascinating men I ever knew. And one of the most learned men, most erudite men, you know, whom I ever knew. Well, it was such a long time ago now. We visited him many times. For instance, we knew him on Long Island, and he had a house on Long Island. And, you know, the landscape there. . . . You know, it's a Long Island landscape. But he

somehow changed the landscape—by himself—and it had a real Russian kind of quality to it. And he was also a very avid collector. He would collect anything, by anybody. I think that he lacked what the Russians call "sumakritika," criticizing oneself. He lacked that. His work always had to be edited, the art. But the same thing is true with his collection of pictures. He would collect anything, anybody. He was that kind of a man.

MILTON BROWN: But his work is uneven. Some of it, isn't it?

RAPHAEL SOYER: His work has to be edited.

MILTON BROWN: Sometimes it's fascinating.

RAPHAEL SOYER: His work has to be edited.

MILTON BROWN: Yeah.

RAPHAEL SOYER: But once in a while he did a magnificent one.

MILTON BROWN: He was always painting his wife.

RAPHAEL SOYER: He was always painting his wife, yes. He was always painting his wife, and after a while everybody, every other woman whom he painted began to look like his wife, you know.

MILTON BROWN: [chuckles]

RAPHAEL SOYER: He was a good academic draftsman. Some of his drawings are too academic. Can you imagine this? He was, well, he called himself "Cuba Futurist."

MILTON BROWN: Yeah.

RAPHAEL SOYER: A Cubist and Futurist, a combination. And yet later on he did very kind of, I should say, somewhat banal academic drawings.

MILTON BROWN: But what he became famous for, in a way, was a pseudo-primitive sort of painting of Russian peasants and cows, that every. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: Right, the _____ _____.

MILTON BROWN: That's the kind of picture he sold, and I don't think they're his best pictures.

RAPHAEL SOYER: They're not his best. I think the best are the paintings he did yet in Russia. I think so, when he was with that crowd, you know, with this. . . .

MILTON BROWN: The Futurist crowd. Miakovsky was. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: He was a friend of Miakovsky, yes. And Miakovsky was also an artist, pretty good draftsman. I saw some of his drawings. But those primitives, semi-primitive, pictures were, well, they were so Russian. I mean, it's a kind of a Russian tradition.

MILTON BROWN: Yeah.

RAPHAEL SOYER: I mean, they painted that way. He was not the only one. But there was a real genuine quality in his work. But then he painted some very good paintings, I think, of the lower east side. Some very good paintings. Where he painted the architecture of the lower east side, and the people of the lower east side. I remember a pier, a picture of a pier, that he painted with a whole lot of people sitting along the water. That's quite an impressive painting.

MILTON BROWN: Which reminds me, did you know Jerome Myers?

RAPHAEL SOYER: I know him, yes. I met him then. I remember I was in Jerome Myers' place in Carnegie Hall. There was a big piano there, and there were several artists there. I think Gifford Beal was there.

MILTON BROWN: Um hmm.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Also Guy Pene duBois, I remember. I had a very nice feeling towards duBois. He was another man who was very unostentatious, and he was my teacher at the Art Students League for a while.

MILTON BROWN: Yeah, you spoke about that. One of the things that's interesting is that you were probably not close to the Stieglitz circle at all?

RAPHAEL SOYER: No.

MILTON BROWN: No.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Later on I knew Max Weber and I knew Abe Walkowitz.

MILTON BROWN: Yeah, but they really were not the Stieglitz group like Marin and Dove. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: I never met Marin, no, no.

MILTON BROWN: You didn't know him?

RAPHAEL SOYER: Somebody wanted to take me to Marin, that was in. . . . Where was it? New Jersey I think. But I never had the chance. I never had the time. Somehow it didn't happen. No, I didn't know Marin. I didn't know Arthur Dove. I didn't know these others.

MILTON BROWN: Did you know Duchamp at all?

RAPHAEL SOYER: No.

MILTON BROWN: And Man Ray?

RAPHAEL SOYER: No.

MILTON BROWN: That was a different circle.

RAPHAEL SOYER: There was an interesting thing. Man Ray exhibited at the Daniel Gallery. That's where I exhibited.

MILTON BROWN: Oh, yeah.

RAPHAEL SOYER: And I have his book, I think, autobiography. Do you know that book? Man Ray's autobiography?

MILTON BROWN: Yeah, um hmm, yeah.

RAPHAEL SOYER: And he was. . . . Now, which one was he? They had the studio. When he was an American, when he was here in this country, he describes how he had a studio together with somebody else.

MILTON BROWN: Another artist?

RAPHAEL SOYER: Another artist.

MILTON BROWN: Oh. I should have known. And he was involved with a magazine, a little magazine in those days. Man Ray in the early days was an anarchist. I mean, he did covers for the anarchist magazine and. . . . But he left this country about 1919. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: Yes, and stayed there _____ _____.

MILTON BROWN: . . . and he stayed there until '39 when the war broke out. So he was really more a European artist and a photographer rather than a painter.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Ah, yes. He was in Europe. He was in Europe. I remember. . . . Of course, I remember Weber and Walkowitz very vividly. Walkowitz especially was very lively, interesting. . . . A nice man. Weber was a little bit more. . . . Weber was very famous when I was young, when I was a student at the League.

MILTON BROWN: Uh huh.

RAPHAEL SOYER: When I was a student of du Bois', Weber was a very, very well-known, very much admired, and very much respected artist.

MILTON BROWN: Well, I suppose during those days actually until about 1940, Weber was one of the leading artists in America. Marin and Weber were sort of the big names.

RAPHAEL SOYER: They were the big names. They were the big names.

MILTON BROWN: By that time, you know, Walkowitz had. . . . I think he wasn't even drawing anymore. He was handing out the little. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: Yes.

MILTON BROWN: . . . pictures. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: Already at that time? In the forties?

MILTON BROWN: Oh, yeah.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Is that so? Yeah.

MILTON BROWN: I mean, and then he made a whole, a whole deal, I think. . . . He was a very sweet man. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: Very sweet man.

MILTON BROWN: He went to every opening I can remember.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Every opening and every concert, he was always there.

MILTON BROWN: He was always there. And he finally had a project whereby he had all the artists he knew paint portraits of him.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Oh, yes. I painted portraits of him.

MILTON BROWN: And, remember? There was an exhibition.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Yes, yes. I did two portraits. One I don't know where it is. One the Brooklyn Museum has it. One that I gave him he gave to the Brooklyn Museum.

MILTON BROWN: It seems at least that the artists' community in those days, let's say in the thirties—in retrospect maybe it wasn't true—it seemed to be closer knit, and I think you said before things were a little more intimate. And of course on WPA many of them were thrown together, and through the Congress and the Union they got to be closer. But it seems to me, though, well, it's a long time ago. It seemed to me that at one point in the thirties when attitudes toward art changed, many of the people who once were friendly seemed to become less friendly, almost as if aesthetic attitudes had changed them. Did you find that to be true?

RAPHAEL SOYER: Well, I don't know. You see, I really don't know. I never felt personally antagonistic towards the Abstract Expressionists. I just feel I'm against the. . . . I'm against the premise of Abstract Expressionism, but not against the artists. And some of them I think like, of course, like Arshile Gorky, and others were quite talented people. Others became famous when they became Abstract Expressionists, and they were just ordinary artists. I mean, if they had remained realistic or representational artists, probably they would not be as well known as they became when they became Abstract Expressionists.
But I know that many artists, and I among them, were troubled by this sudden advent, you know, sudden advent of Abstract Expressionism. It came very suddenly. I don't know how to explain it, why it got so important all of a sudden, why they became the darlings of the art world, I mean, so quickly. I could never explain that or the reason for it. But I know that many artists were troubled by that. They were troubled. Among them were many very good artists like Kuniyoshi, Ben Shahn, Edward Hopper, for instance. Edward Hopper never kind of. . . . He was also very straight, very much like Jack Levine, I think. I mean, he was kind of very honest, a very direct man. If he didn't like something he would say so.

MILTON BROWN: Um hmm.

RAPHAEL SOYER: I mean, if he was not for Abstract Expressionism he would say so, no matter what. Although I do believe that he was somewhat influenced by abstraction later on. Later on, when he did the very last picture and there's nothing but wall and light and it has an element of abstraction there, very strongly, very strongly. But the artists were troubled and every once in a while I'd meet somebody on the street, and they'd say, "Look what's happening to art. Look at this Abstract Expressionism." I remember I said, "Well why don't you do something about it?" Someone suggested that I write, and I sat down and just wrote a very simple card, some postcards, to Hopper, to Kuniyoshi, to Ben Shahn, to Isabel Bishop, to other artists. I don't remember now who they were. And I said let's get together and discuss about the art situation today. We're artists and we'd like to know what is happening. And the interesting thing: we met, and we met again and again, and we became very, kind of a very interesting thing. Now, most the artists I got to know well. . . . I mean like Hopper, like Henry Poor, you know, this type of artist, I got to know at that time and became friends with them at that time. And then we began to publish a little magazine. Not too many issues came out because, you know, artists are not really. . . . They didn't want. . . . I mean, I was, I suggested that we get some writers in, professional writers to get interested in that. But, no, they wanted to be only ones. They were right, they would express their ideas and so on. So that after about three or four issues, I think three issues, and each issue took a long time to print. . . .

MILTON BROWN: What was it called? Reality?

RAPHAEL SOYER: Called Reality. The artists couldn't extend anymore their ideas. I mean, that's all, that's finished.

MILTON BROWN: Yeah.

RAPHAEL SOYER: They couldn't repeat themselves anymore, you know? They had their say and it ceased to exist. But it created a furor. I'm telling you, it created a furor in the art world. The antagonism towards that new magazine was terrific. I had all their literature—it would come to my studio—and the Museum of Modern Art actually sent a messenger with a letter warning us not to be under the influence of Communism or something like that. There was something Communistic about this business.

MILTON BROWN: Under Communism? Really?

RAPHAEL SOYER: You know, that was during the McCarthy period. And this Frankfurter, of the Art News, was it? He was the editor of the Art News? He wrote a terrible editorial.

MILTON BROWN: Alfred Frankfurter.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Yes. Terrible editorial. Something about Voltaire, he mentioned. Voltaire somehow. . . . There was a case where Voltaire defended somebody whose ideas he did not agree with. And Frankfurter wrote in the editorial that when a situation like this comes he will not act like Voltaire. It was terrific. And then when many of the artists heard about the letter from the Museum of Modern Art, they seceded.

MILTON BROWN: [chuckles]

RAPHAEL SOYER: They left us. I got a telegram in the middle of the night from Abe Rattner who was in Chicago at that time to cross him off. And Ben Shahn, from whom I got an answer, "Oh, Raphael, it's time we should get together and talk about this." He was also corraled. And some of the others. But Hopper was very stalwart, you know.

MILTON BROWN: Yeah.

RAPHAEL SOYER: And also Henry Poor. I admired him. I admired that man. I admired the personality of Henry Poor. He wrote the most pessimistic answer. He said, "Oh, it's useless to fight it. But he was very much involved, once he got into it. And I remember he said, when this letter came from the, from the museum, he said, "We are the liberals of a democratic society," something like that. "We are liberals," as if there's nothing to be worried about.

MILTON BROWN: Yeah, um hmm.

RAPHAEL SOYER: I mean, he acted like that.

MILTON BROWN: Well, this was in the fifties actually. Wasn't it? Yeah.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Fifties, in the fifties, middle fifties. And then we got letters from Europe. We got letters from some of these artists in Europe, too, and even the famous Berenson.

MILTON BROWN: Bernard Berenson?

RAPHAEL SOYER: Wrote us a letter, but his letter was so uninteresting that we. . . .

MILTON BROWN: [laughing] You didn't publish it?

RAPHAEL SOYER: We didn't, no. We didn't, no.

MILTON BROWN: Was he for you or against you?

RAPHAEL SOYER: He was for us, but he wrote a very insignificant kind of a letter, and somehow it was almost a little bit senile or something. I don't know. Somehow it would not do much for the magazine, so we didn't print it. From Italy, of course, we got from Cortissos, we got a favorable, very didactic letter. But from Paris we got some letters, too. I forgot what.

MILTON BROWN: Oh, it's interesting that it got that far!

RAPHAEL SOYER: It's amazing. We got letters from all over, from this country, all over. From museum directors. We got crazier letters from—now, the Museum of Modern Art warning us against Communism, yes? We got

letters from some kind of lunatics, you know, saying “We’re with you. Let’s fight the godless, the godless Museum of Modern Art,” something like that. So you see the range. There they are. The Museum was against us, and those lunatics were against it. It was interesting. It was interesting. I came to know those people around at that time. An interesting thing is that I was very friendly still with Alex Brook, Alexander Brook, you remember him?

MILTON BROWN: Yeah.

RAPHAEL SOYER: At that time. And we used to go out to Southhampton [Sag Harbor] once in a while. I think they still have a house there. We used to see one another. And I remember I asked him to join. I asked him to join. It would have done him good, you know, because he became very sour. He couldn’t take the success of the Abstract Expressionists. But if he had joined us there would have been, you know, somehow it would have given him more—maybe he will have not stopped painting. You know, he completely. . . .

MILTON BROWN: Yeah. Did he stop painting?

RAPHAEL SOYER: Not completely. I mean, what he painted was so poor in those days. I mean, without any enthusiasm or without any strength. I think that if he had joined us at that time. . . . He just said no.

MILTON BROWN: Well, that, it’s interesting. . . . Maybe we should for a moment just go back to the thirties before we leave it completely, because this somehow seems to be the result of things that happened in the thirties, that by this time Abstract Expressionism, abstract art, had become dominant.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Took over, yes, took over.

MILTON BROWN: And all the museums were for it.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Yes, right.

MILTON BROWN: And of course I think the Museum of Modern Art’s action, as you describe it, must be the result of McCarthyism in the fifties.

RAPHAEL SOYER: I don’t what it was the result of. But that was a. . . .

MILTON BROWN: Why would they be so afraid of. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: That’s right, that’s right.

MILTON BROWN: . . . and Frankfurter saying that he wouldn’t stand up for your right to make a statement.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Well, I have a. . . . I have a theory. You know, the Soviet Union and the United States at that time, we had this cold war.

MILTON BROWN: Yeah, well that’s part of. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: Now, in the Soviet Union art became very representational. I mean, before then they had these abstract artists and others, great, whatever it is, movement, you know. And then they became absolutely representational. And I think that it had something to do with that. I mean, they were so much against the Soviet Union that even art had to be different from the Soviet Union. The art of the Soviet Union was so representational; that is communist art, that’s communistic art. If art in America is representational, it has an element of Communism in it. I think that was the feeling I got from the museums and from the critics in those days. They warned us actually of Communism.

MILTON BROWN: Yeah, well, it’s strange.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Now the people who worked there. . . .

MILTON BROWN: Now did they think that Andrew Wyeth was?

RAPHAEL SOYER: Wyeth? Well, I don’t know. Wyeth wasn’t a member of the group.

MILTON BROWN: He wasn’t a member of the group. It was. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: I don’t know, but you see I mean this idea, I mean that we came out for representational. . . .

MILTON BROWN: Yeah, um hmm.

RAPHAEL SOYER: . . . for the image, for the image, as Henry Poor kept on insisting. The image, you see. And they

were. . . . And I think something of that crept into the picture of that in those days.

MILTON BROWN: Yeah, well, but in the thirties, before abstract art became so dominant, in the thirties as we remember, there was really a kind of open field in which there was American scene painting, and urban realism. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: Yes.

MILTON BROWN: . . . and social realism. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: Yes.

MILTON BROWN: . . . and abstract art, and there were all sorts of things. And in some ways the pivotal movement of those times, because it again got most of the criticism, was what people called Social Realism. And that was an art that dealt with social themes and on the whole from a radical or a critical attitude toward American society and became a focus of attack from the regionalists as well as the abstract artists.

Tape 2, side B

MILTON BROWN: I'd like to just cut it short and ask you, oh, to say something about Social Realism. What was your attitude toward it? What do you think its limitations were? And so forth.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Well, I think that Social Realism is the same like, is also one of those confusing words, you know, confusing phrases, you know, Social Realism. Like the word realism itself. I mean, has many connotations today. I mean, they're many meanings to realism. And Social Realism, I don't know. So, for instance, I never painted a picture of people in a factory. I never painted a picture of a policeman beating up strikers. I never painted a picture of a meeting on Union Square, something like that. And now those I suppose. . . . I never painted a very beautiful worker and a very ugly Capitalist. Now I guess those were considered Social Realism. But then I think of people in the street. I painted people who were out of work. I mean, they just sat there, either in the sun or in the shade, and did nothing. I painted them a lot. And that too may have been considered Social Realism. Then there were also some cartoons by William Gropper and so on and, and Hugo Gellert and others, probably also were considered Social Realism. And I think that my work had nothing to do with those things, and yet in some ways they're considered. . . . Isabel Bishop painted people on Union Square, you know, also may have been considered Social Realism. But I really don't know what, about this. I think it's a wrong kind of a word. I mean is there, maybe comes from Russia? I mean, is there a thing like Social Realism?

MILTON BROWN: No, well, there really is a difference because what the Russians had was Socialist Realism.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Socialist. I see. Well, there you are.

MILTON BROWN: Now but Socialist Realism was defined by the Communist rulers of Russia, or whoever was making the ideological stance of. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: I see, I see.

MILTON BROWN: And they said that it had to deal with the reality of a Socialist society.

RAPHAEL SOYER: I see, Socialist Realism.

MILTON BROWN: Now, on the other hand, in this country American artists, let's say, in the John Reed Club, those artists who were Communists or they were ideologically involved, saw Social Realism as an attack on Capitalism, so that it couldn't be. . . . It had to be a critical art, so that it's different from Socialist Realism. In other words, an American artist couldn't be a Socialist Realist because he didn't live in a Socialist society, unless he wanted to paint his dreams or his ideals.

RAPHAEL SOYER: I see, I see now the difference, yes.

MILTON BROWN: You see, but a Social Realist dealt with the problems, to reveal the problems of present-day society, and theoretically, ideologically, what they said was that art has to be a weapon in the class struggle, and this was where the difficulty was, because some artists felt that art didn't serve very well as a weapon in a class struggle, that some artists were not capable of that kind of expression. In other words, there were different opinions, and then there were some artists who said, "If we simply paint the reality that's around us, it'll be critical of society," so that the range eventually. . . . Simply because some people said—let's say, the most radical who were writing about it—said that Social Realism is such and such, it doesn't mean that necessarily that definition was correct, because it is something that isn't defined. I think at present, for instance, we have a tendency in art history to deal with the period for that kind of art in general as social art—that is, an art which is concerned with life, contemporary life, in a social sense, so it includes people like Gropper who did cartoons, or

you who did street scenes, or Joe Jones who did things on a farm. See these were all contemporary social life in America. So that. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: You put them all in the same. . . .

MILTON BROWN: We put them in the same category to see them, because I think fundamentally they were looking at the same thing.

RAPHAEL SOYER: I know, but you see, the work, say, of Gropper. . . .

MILTON BROWN: Yeah.

RAPHAEL SOYER: . . . or the work of Joe Jones was a much more didactic. . . . I mean, there was much more of an idea to impress. . . . You know, it was more like preaching something, you know. I painted what I saw. I painted what I saw. All my life I painted what I saw. In those days, I would sketch a lot. I would walk along the streets and sketch a lot. And I saw a lot of these people, and I began, became very much interested in painting them and drawing them. I did many, many drawings in the street, in Union Square Park, side streets, and I somehow never. . . . Yes, I was a member of the John Reed Club, and they talked a lot about Social Realism. They talked an awful lot about it.

MILTON BROWN: Yes.

RAPHAEL SOYER: And I could never grasp the idea. I could never. . . . Somehow their ideas, either I didn't understand them or I was not able to accept them, you see. They would say that you do have to paint a capitalist in a very ugly way, or you have to paint a worker as a wonderful looking man and so on—and they did that. I never painted say a fight between workers and policemen—and cops, you know. I never. . . . Philip Evergood painted a very important painting at that time of, I forgot what the name of it was, but. . . .

MILTON BROWN: Called American Tragedy.

RAPHAEL SOYER: American Tragedy, yes. And many artists, I remember Nikolai Cikovsky painted a group of people in Union Square and policemen on horses and so on.

MILTON BROWN: Right.

RAPHAEL SOYER: I saw those things, but somehow I never was impelled to paint those things, maybe because of my nature, you know. I paint simpler things, you know, quieter, and so on.

MILTON BROWN: Yeah, but. . . . That's true, I know.

RAPHAEL SOYER: But I don't think that you can put all these things in one category, you see.

MILTON BROWN: Yeah, but at the same time Philip Evergood didn't only paint that. He painted. . . . Philip Evergood and Gwathmy and Jack Levine painted totally different things.

RAPHAEL SOYER: And, but what I was going to say, I think that, although I'm not an art historian, I think it's kind of not absolutely correct to put all of those people, I mean, even if they were all members of the John Reed Club, I mean, I don't think it's absolutely accurate to put them in one group. I think that the idea of social art, "social art" is a very good word. I think, of course, it is social art. You depict the people, the events of those days, and so on, but somehow you can't put Gropper and me in the same category. I think we were different, completely different in content for what we did. I mean, I certainly, or Philip Evergood. I mean, I was a different kind of an artist. And the same thing with Isabel Bishop—probably is also different kind of an art. I know Reginald Marsh painted also in those days. I mean, his painting was absolutely uninterested in what's going on—I mean in politics. But he was aware of the humanity of people, whether it's Coney Island or whether it's movie houses, you know, and so on. I mean, would you put him in the same category? I mean, I don't know. Maybe social art rather than Social Realism, rather than Social Realism, yes.

MILTON BROWN: Yeah, well, that was the distinction I was trying to make.

RAPHAEL SOYER: That you were making, yes, and I think that's. . . .

MILTON BROWN: And under the banner of social art. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: You can put them all, you can put them all.

MILTON BROWN: . . . you can all go in and you can say you have one thing in common.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Yeah.

MILTON BROWN: Even though one is propagandistic and the other doesn't care about politics, the one thing they have in common is that their subject is the people in contemporary real life.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Yeah, I think social art. . . .

MILTON BROWN: And it's a social relationship that they're dealing with.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Yeah, yeah. In other words, I think that representational art is social art. Representational art is social art.

MILTON BROWN: Well, here again, you have to be careful because suppose you did a still life or a landscape? See, the difference would be that the social relationship between people and society is being dealt with in one case. . . . And it doesn't mean that it's bad, though, I mean, or of no value. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: No, I know what you mean.

MILTON BROWN: But it's a different category.

RAPHAEL SOYER: No, I think social, or social art, I think that's good. . . . You see, I never thought in these terms, you know. Either it was Social Realism or something else. But social art, yes, I accept that, social art, yeah. I can see that.

MILTON BROWN: And I think then we have to keep Social Realism for one particular period when artists were interested in making an art which was propaganda. Because if you can remember back to those days, the reviews of the exhibitions were never satisfactory. They always said that there weren't many pictures that were really Social Realism. [chuckling]

RAPHAEL SOYER: That's right.

MILTON BROWN: Remember? Because artists simply didn't know how to deal, in many cases, how to deal with. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: I remember that, yeah. But I certainly was not a propagandistic artist because. . . .

MILTON BROWN: No.

RAPHAEL SOYER: . . . I think that those people, not with the idea of propaganda, but I just painted them like what I, the way I painted portraits, you know. And they are portraits of people, but at the same—I want to ask something—at the same time there were people, say, like Sheeler. They were painting in those days, Sheeler, Demuth, and Niles Spencer. I remember Niles Spencer very well.

MILTON BROWN: Yeah.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Now how would you—even Hopper—now how would you place them? Now what are they? They were completely aloof. I mean their work had nothing to do with. . . . I mean if Sheeler painted a factory, there was not a human being in the factory.

MILTON BROWN: That's right. See, that's the point.

RAPHAEL SOYER: That's right.

MILTON BROWN: It isn't the human relationship that he showed. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: In other words, they're not social, social art.

MILTON BROWN: No, I mean, they were, they're not social artists.

RAPHAEL SOYER: They're not social artists. Well, what are they?

MILTON BROWN: Oh! We have a different name. I think we're working on a term for them. [laughing]

RAPHAEL SOYER: They're _____ _____.

MILTON BROWN: They're mechanistic.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Mechanistic. I, I. . . .

MILTON BROWN: You see, the development in the twenties. . . . There was a big, there was a development of an interest in this country in the machine, and the precisionists like Sheeler, and Demuth, Lozowick, Niles Spencer, Ault, Stefan Hirsch, Elsie Driggs, Georgia O'Keeffe, that whole group became interested in the industrial landscape.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Lozowick was I think a different kind. I think later on he began to paint workers and. . . .

MILTON BROWN: That's right. In the thirties he began to introduce the human figure because he accepted in a way, he recognized the criticism that was leveled at the mechanists, that they were only painting a machine.

RAPHAEL SOYER: You think that's what made him do that? I mean, do people think so?

MILTON BROWN: Yeah. I think he became conscious that his art. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: Oh. I don't know. I call those artists—I mean, like Spencer and Sheeler, and O'Keeffe, and Demuth—you know, kind of. . . . I have against them a kind of. . . . I call them resentfully, a little, somewhat resentfully, I call them the aristocrats of the so-called indigenous American art. Somehow there's something cold about them, aristocratic, you know, that they kind of. . . . You know, I saw an exhibition of these people, you know, a whole show. I think it was in one of these. . . . I forgot the name of the gallery. The Crispo Gallery.

MILTON BROWN: Yeah.

RAPHAEL SOYER: I saw a whole show on work by Hopper, O'Keeffe, Demuth, Sheeler, and so on. There was not one human being in those pictures. They also were so kind of, it seemed to me, so cold, so aristocratic, so, so devoid of interest in humanity. Everything was so prophylactic, so clear, those pictures. They were so nice, so clear.

MILTON BROWN: Yeah, at one point they were even called the Sterilists.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Very well. And I somehow disliked it, in a sense. It made a kind of an impression of kind of a very cold, something cold about them, and nothing of humanism, it seemed. Even now there is a catalog of. . . . You were involved in the French catalog that came?

MILTON BROWN: Yeah.

RAPHAEL SOYER: And the American art, there were about ten American artists, mostly Sheeler, Demuth and. . . .

MILTON BROWN: That's right.

RAPHAEL SOYER: . . . and so on. And, again, it's so different from the art of other countries. In all the other countries, I mean, there is a noise, there's people, there are gestures, there is everything. But American artists are different. I mean, it's, I mean, the selection of the. . . .

MILTON BROWN: That selection was a very strange selection.

RAPHAEL SOYER: They're very cold, very. . . . Except I had some people in my pictures.

MILTON BROWN: Yeah, well, I didn't understand how you got in there because you were unlike the rest. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: But I'm an American artist.

MILTON BROWN: Yeah, but they were making a point.

RAPHAEL SOYER: No, I had an exhibition in Paris.

MILTON BROWN: Yeah.

RAPHAEL SOYER: And the guy became interested in my work. He saw my exhibition of drawings and was very impressed. That's Albert. . . . What's his name again?

MILTON BROWN: Jean-Clair.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Yeah. And he invited me to send pictures, and he even knew which pictures. He picked them out. He said, "Well, now, this one, this one. . . ."

MILTON BROWN: I remember when he asked me to do it, and at first I turned it down, he had, he wanted. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: Because you didn't think it's an accurate. . . .

MILTON BROWN: To me it was not accurate. I didn't know what he was trying to do. He was leaving out major realistic artists and putting in people who. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: Well, wouldn't you call them realists too? I mean. . . .

MILTON BROWN: Yeah, but then, then you have to. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: . . . they are realists.

MILTON BROWN: Well, but the range was strange.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Yeah, yeah.

MILTON BROWN: Now then Albright doesn't belong there either, you see.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Well, he's a realist, isn't he?

MILTON BROWN: He is, he's certainly a realist, but he isn't like Sheeler. You can't say that Albright is not interested in human beings.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Well, in a different way.

MILTON BROWN: I mean. . . . In a different way, but it's very. . . . I think with the years he's always strikes me as almost a little paranoid about the human condition but it's a philosophic condition. It's more philosophic than social. And he's worried about death, and. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: Yes.

MILTON BROWN: Yeah, but that's human, and. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: Yes.

MILTON BROWN: Well, you don't see that in Sheeler. You don't see it in Ralston Crawford. Crawford is almost an abstract artist. So, well, anyway.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Well, they told me about him, that he's a very courageous man—that's number one—about this guy Jean-Clair. . . .

MILTON BROWN: Yes.

RAPHAEL SOYER: . . . and that he has ideas of his own and he fights for them.

MILTON BROWN: He certainly does, yeah.

RAPHAEL SOYER: And I probably would not have been there, because I was unknown in France, completely unknown. And the only reason why I happened to be in it is because he saw my exhibition of drawings at the gallery. That's the only reason.

MILTON BROWN: Yeah, well, I remember then he finally wrote me a letter and he said, "Maybe you'll agree because I have added Raphael Soyer." [laughing]

RAPHAEL SOYER: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah, is that right? Very interesting, yeah. I didn't know that.

MILTON BROWN: Well, I think maybe we did enough for tonight?

MAY 28, 1981
Tape 3, side A

MILTON BROWN: May twenty-eighth, 1981, an interview with Raphael Soyer with Milton Brown. Raphael, I'd like to ask you to spend this afternoon talking about the contemporary art scene. From your vantage point of many years of experience and having seen so much and so many different things happening, you have. . . . We have often talked about contemporary art; you have very decided opinions. Why don't we get it down on the record in general. What do you think of the art scene today?

RAPHAEL SOYER: Well, I find the art world today, I mean, the art scene today, quite confusing. I mean, it was much simpler in the 1920s and even earlier when I began to paint. Things were kind of more simple. I mean the artists—or the students; I was a student then—knew what they wanted. I knew exactly what I wanted to do. I. . . . And the art schools in those days, even the art schools in those days, were different than the art schools of

today. In those days the art schools were filled with young people, young men and women who were I would call professional art students. In other words, they had ambitions to become artists, to become painters. They. . . .

MILTON BROWN: Could I interrupt just a minute here. Is that not true today?

RAPHAEL SOYER: No, today the art schools are very, very different from what they were in those days. The art schools today are filled with elderly people, men and women who have retired and they come to paint. They're not what I would call the professional art students. And, you know, when I was at the National Academy and at the Art Students League, there were no middle-aged people. They were all young people, and they were kind of ambitious young people, neurotic in a sense. They used to quarrel with one another. They used to talk about art in a different way than people talk about art today. They were very ambitious to become known, to become professional painters, and they studied drawing—it was very, very important. And even the art instructors were very different in those days than today. For instance, I remember at the Art Students League. When I was a student—I went there very briefly—they were all very well known painters. There was Max Weber, Guy Pene duBois, Kenneth Hayes Miller. And I remember it was quite an honor to teach at the Art Students League; it had a very great tradition. And when I was invited to teach there after my second one-man show, I was very. . . . Well, I was flattered. I thought, "Here I am, I'm still young." I was a student there just a little while ago, and here I am come to be a teacher where Weber, Chase, Guy Pene duBois, John Sloan, all these people. And they were big men in those days, you know. They taught there. Today when you go to the Art Students League, you don't know who teaches there. Anybody can teach there. And the students there are not very. . . . What you call it? I'll call them professional art students, I mean.

MILTON BROWN: Dedicated.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Dedicated.

MILTON BROWN: Well, where are those students now?

RAPHAEL SOYER: They probably are scattered in the schools, but they're not the majority. The majority at the Art Students League at the New School at the. . . .

MILTON BROWN: Well, maybe they're in the colleges.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Well, that's another thing. The colleges took over teaching art. And they teach art in a different way than we were taught. It was not working all day long at the Academy or at the Art Students League, or the Beaux Arts School—which was a beautiful, wonderful school in those days—where we could spend all day long, stay there, draw, paint, do sculpture, anything we wanted. Once in a while a prominent sculptor or painter would come, criticize us, and there were many interesting students there, all young people. I mean, they, I remember one of the older people was Baizerman, a sculptor. He was an older. . . .

MILTON BROWN: Saul Baizerman.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Yes. He wasn't so old, but he was older than the rest of the students. And it was a different spirit and a different. . . . You know, I taught later on in the schools, you know, and I had to deal with middle-aged people, with amateurs, you know, what do you call them?

MILTON BROWN: Hobbyists.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Yes. Hobbyists and so on would come there. And then, also, another thing is that it's costly to go to a school, and many young people can't afford to go to those schools. I remember when I was a student I think it was fourteen dollars a month at the Art Students League, and I couldn't afford to pay it. My uncle paid it for me. But that was the amount of money people had to pay. Today you have to be pretty well off to go to an art school. And the teachers there are unknown people. I don't know. When I look at the instructors at the Art Students League, I don't know who they are. I haven't seen their work. I don't know what they stand for or what they are. Once in a while there's an older teacher whom I recognize, whose name I recognize.

MILTON BROWN: Yeah, I remember the old days there was. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: Julian Levi or someone like that.

MILTON BROWN: Yes. In the old days it used to be Alexander Brook, Yas Kuniyoshi, _____.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Kuniyoshi was a teacher, yes. Alex Brook was a teacher.

MILTON BROWN: Brackman. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: Well, Brackman was an academic kind of teacher, yes. But today there are unknown people

teaching. And the students are not. . . . I wouldn't call them professional art students. And there is no standard anymore. But generally there is no standard in art anymore. Anybody can be an artist. You don't have to be a, a. . . . You don't have to know how to draw well. You don't have to. . . . I mean, anybody can be an artist; that's what I've found. Of course there are many talented people among the younger artists no matter what their persuasion is. But generally speaking it's a very confusing art world, and there is no standard. And, I don't know, at times I feel that there's an element of corruption in the art world. I mean, on the part of the collectors, the auctioneers, even the critics—and finally even the artist becomes a little corrupt and he begins to paint what is demanded of him. So this is my feeling about the art situation.

MILTON BROWN: Do you think students are less well trained now?

RAPHAEL SOYER: They're very less. . . . Yes, very less well trained. The universities took over the teaching of art, and they teach art like they teach, well, other subjects: literature, philosophy, or anything else. I mean: The first year you'll do this, next year you'll do that, another year you'll do that. And so on. I mean, they have a kind of a, I don't know, a program, how to teach art. And that to me is not. . . . We used to spend all day drawing and painting. That's all I know. Once in a while somebody would come and talk to us about, what you call it?

MILTON BROWN: Anatomy.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Anatomy, yes. Talk about anatomy. But generally speaking the main thing was to draw and to paint. Once a month we had to make a composition. We had to paint a composition. We were given a subject and we painted it.

MILTON BROWN: That was at the National Academy.

RAPHAEL SOYER: That's at the National Academy. At the Art Students League I remember Guy Pene duBois, who was my teacher. First of all, I admired him because he was a recognized artist, and I saw a couple of his paintings, and I liked. So I was a very, well, I kind of. . . . He wasn't much of a teacher, you know. He was kind of sardonic, sarcastic, you know, but he didn't take to. . . . He was not what I call a dedicated teacher, but because I liked him I kind of got his ideas by osmosis, you know. He suggested I paint. . . . After I left school we were still friends, and I would go to his studio to show him my work. And he suggested to me to paint the kind of subject matter that I know. He said, "Paint your family. Paint your father and mother. Paint your brothers." And I did, and I learned a great deal from that. And my art changed completely. You know, when I was in the Academy, they painted like Sargent, you know. That was the big deal.

MILTON BROWN: Right.

RAPHAEL SOYER: And I learned very quickly to paint like Sargent.

MILTON BROWN: So you did portraits and things like that?

RAPHAEL SOYER: I did those portraits and nudes, I mean, like all the rest of the students, you know. Some were more agile. Some did more Sargentesque work. Even Matulka. You remember Matulka?

MILTON BROWN: Yeah.

RAPHAEL SOYER: He painted like Sargent.

MILTON BROWN: Yeah.

RAPHAEL SOYER: When I was at the school two big paintings of his were hanging on the wall, and they were very Sargentesque and very skillful, very skillful. But then he changed. Completely.

MILTON BROWN: Yeah, well, he got influenced by Picasso.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Yes. Yes, he became very much influenced by French art, yes. But he had something, something. . . . I don't know what the word's are. He was a. . . .

MILTON BROWN: I think he was a Czech, wasn't he?

RAPHAEL SOYER: He was a Czech. He had something of this. . . .

MILTON BROWN: Slavic.

RAPHAEL SOYER: What do you call them? The Russians, the Czechs, the. . . .

MILTON BROWN: Slavs.

RAPHAEL SOYER: . . . Slavs. Well, Slav quality, yes.

MILTON BROWN: Yeah.

RAPHAEL SOYER: He had that. But I liked him very much. I mean, he would come to the studio at the Academy long after he left the Academy, and we treated him with respect. Respected him more than our teachers. He didn't criticize us. He was already being a success, where he already exhibited at the Rhen Galleries.

MILTON BROWN: Yes.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Yes. But I know that the art situation today, you know. . . . First of all, there are more museums today. In a sense, I mean, they are more museums today, more exhibitions today, more of those big jazzed-up books on art today than there ever were, but I still remember. . . . Everything's in. . . .

MILTON BROWN: Well, the truth is, you know. . . . I think, we can't forget that the Museum of Modern Art only opened in '29.

RAPHAEL SOYER: That's right.

MILTON BROWN: The Whitney in '31.

RAPHAEL SOYER: That's right. None of these museums. . . .

MILTON BROWN: And the Metropolitan didn't really buy contemporary art.

RAPHAEL SOYER: The only museums were the Metropolitan, the Brooklyn Museum. . . . That I remember. But. . . .

MILTON BROWN: But they weren't buying contemporary art much.

RAPHAEL SOYER: No. Everything today is in profusion, right? Everything today is a little bit jazzed up, you know. These colored productions, these colored lithographs. I mean, all those things. To me it's a kind of a sign of decay, of not real art. I mean, commercials—a lot of commercials today, that didn't exist in those days. And all of these galleries that exist today, all these auction houses and everything else. All these artists today, you know. More artists now than ever. So that it's a very confusing picture.

MILTON BROWN: Well, the thirties was the Depression, but what. . . . When you sold your first paintings you got perhaps a hundred dollars or two hundred dollars?

RAPHAEL SOYER: Or less.

MILTON BROWN: Or less. What was an established artist getting for a painting in those days?

RAPHAEL SOYER: I don't know. I don't know. But it seems to me not terribly long ago. Well, how long is Hopper dead? I have forgotten _____.

MILTON BROWN: Oh, about ten years now.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Ten years. Well, when I painted him, he told me that a painting of his was sold for two thousand dollars, and he thought that was pretty good. Is that possible?

MILTON BROWN: When you painted him, he sold a painting for two. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: Yeah, in nineteen, in 1960.

MILTON BROWN: Oh, that's hardly possible.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Is that possible? Somehow. . . .

MILTON BROWN: Maybe a watercolor.

RAPHAEL SOYER: I don't know. I think that it was a painting that didn't belong to him. Somebody else bought it from somebody. . . .

MILTON BROWN: Oh, it was sold on the market?

RAPHAEL SOYER: Was sold. . . . It seems to me. . . .

MILTON BROWN: Well, obviously everybody. . . . Yeah.

RAPHAEL SOYER: I'm not certain. I'm not certain.

MILTON BROWN: Yeah.

RAPHAEL SOYER: But in those days. . . . I don't know. I remember that John Sloan sold a whole collection, a whole group of his paintings, just to get a monthly salary or something. Somebody should pay a monthly certain amount of money. Not much. But he was glad to sell a lot of things. And that was in my time.

MILTON BROWN: Actually, it's fairly obvious that art has become not only kind of big business, but has become much more popular. That is, as you say, there are more museums, there are more people involved, so that the whole field has become a larger and more productive area.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Productive? I don't. . . . Well, productive in a certain way.

MILTON BROWN: In the sense that many things are made and many people are making them.

RAPHAEL SOYER: More things are made, right.

MILTON BROWN: I would like you to address yourself to a. . . . Let's forget that, and there, when. . . . Whenever you get anything operating on that scale, you find many things that are capable of being criticized, and when things get out of hand, there are forces. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: I think things did get out of hand. I think today things are out of hand.

MILTON BROWN: Just think for a minute about what artists are painting or sculpting or. . . . In other words, what do you think of what artists are doing these days? They're not doing the same thing that was being done fifty years ago or a hundred years ago.

RAPHAEL SOYER: No. But frankly a lot of art that exists today, that's being done today, does not interest me. Just simply does not interest me. It does not even interest me enough even to criticize it. You see so much, I see so much of it. I mean, I know there is so much of it exists. When I look at the art magazines, you know, the articles they write about artists or they describe exhibitions. Or in the newspapers, you know, when you see a reproduction of what's supposed to be a piece of bronze sculpture and. . . . Somehow I don't know what it is; it doesn't interest me. It's just a piece of bronze. And to write about it and to describe it and to make a big deal of it, to me it's a very. . . .

MILTON BROWN: You go to many exhibitions?

RAPHAEL SOYER: I go to exhibitions that interest me, that are of interest to me.

MILTON BROWN: All right, let me ask. . . . This would. . . . I think we pinned it down a little. After all, in your generation you knew—at least personally; I don't know how closely—but you knew people like Mark Rothko or let's say Barnard Newman. And Barnard Newman and Rothko came out of approximately the same kind of background. And then when Newman, for instance, began to paint religious paintings with long titles from the Bible and fourteen stations of the cross, which were a stripe. . . . I mean, fourteen paintings with a different arrangement of the stripe on the canvas. Well, how did that strike you?

RAPHAEL SOYER: Well, I knew them when they were not abstractionists, and they painted like everybody else painted in those days. Not the really outstanding artists. They all painted. . . . Now, for instance, on one of the art magazines the cover is an early painting by, a landscape, tree and houses by Gottlieb. By Adolph Gottlieb, yeah?

MILTON BROWN: Gottlieb, yeah.

RAPHAEL SOYER: It's a painting that they all painted in the nineteen twenties and thirties, exactly the same way. I mean, this kind of thirties kind of house with the kind of brush strokes. They all painted like that. And they were not outstanding painters. They were not outstanding—at all. They were just painters who painted quite. . . . I don't know. There was nothing extraordinary about the paintings. All the sudden—I don't know how—overnight they became geniuses. They became Abstract Expressionists, and they became geniuses. Of course, there was a club that the. . . . Wasn't there a club of these people who used to gather and talk and so on?

MILTON BROWN: Yeah.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Well, I don't know. I was never there, but I knew them when they were, when they were. . . . What do you call it?

MILTON BROWN: When they were young, when they were students.

RAPHAEL SOYER: . . . so called realistic painters and representationalists, and they were nothing, nothing extraordinary. They were not extraordinary. Not Rothko, not Gottlieb, not. . . . I think that the only one I really liked was Arshile Gorky. I liked him. I liked because he kind of was a very poetic man, you know, and he really knew about art and he loved art and he really knew.

MILTON BROWN: Did you know deKooning?

RAPHAEL SOYER: I knew him very briefly, not very well.

MILTON BROWN: No.

RAPHAEL SOYER: I remember, I remember this guy—and you mentioned him. . . .

MILTON BROWN: Newman?

RAPHAEL SOYER: Newman. Well, I think he was a lazy man. I really think he was. . . . Wasn't he a journalist at one time?

MILTON BROWN: I think he was a school teacher.

RAPHAEL SOYER: I think he was a journalist.

MILTON BROWN: Was he a journalist?

RAPHAEL SOYER: He was a writer, yes. And I remember this other guy, very smart guy, Reinhardt.

MILTON BROWN: Yeah, Ad Reinhardt.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Very intelligent fellow, you know. He was a cartoonist, he was a. . . . I think everything under the sun. And then he began to paint these absolutely black or blue pictures that to me did not mean very much. And I don't see they're a genius, I really don't think they're geniuses. I really don't think. . . . Rothko, you know people talk about him as if it's a kind of, some kind of a religion or something. I can't see it. I really can't see it. I saw an exhibition of his in Venice, I think it was.

MILTON BROWN: I think the Venice Biennale.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Someplace in Venice, and those pictures hung. . . . You know, they were, you know, those European walls, you know, they're huge and very tall, and the paintings looked small, and they looked kind of not so fancy, not so beautiful. I mean, they were kind of grayish almost, you know. I saw several paintings there in Europe every once in a while, and the pictures look kind of gray. I mean, not well stretched and so on; and makes a bad, a not a very good impression on me. I mean, even as objects, they didn't; they kind of made me feel that "Well, poorly stretched," and the canvases were gray, the color was not as sonorous, you know, not so impressive as they say it's supposed to be, and so on. No, I don't see that; I really don't. I saw the exhibition of Rothko at the Guggenheim was it?

MILTON BROWN: Yes.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Well, I can tell you something that Rebecca tells me, my wife tells me—that she knows a woman who went to see the exhibition of Jack Levine at the same time at the Jewish Museum, right across the street. And then she knew nothing about Rothko. She went in also. . . . After she saw the Jack Levine show, she went in to see this Rothko show. She didn't know anything about him. She didn't know that he died. She didn't know that he committed suicide and so on. But she said, "You know, that man will commit suicide someday." After she saw the show. And Rebecca told her that he did. She was amazed. And I thought about his show, "Well, where does he go now? Where does he go from here?" You know? And later on his pictures became the dark, gray, and so on. I thought it was a very tragic show. In a sense. It wasn't great. It wasn't what it's supposed to be and so on. But I felt a tragedy there. I felt the tragedy of the exhibition. And. . . . Well, that's what I think of those people. I think that Gorky tried, tried harder, and he tried to paint like this guy, like that guy. He knew the techniques and the, almost the feelings of many artists, you know, whom he admired.

MILTON BROWN: Um hmm.

RAPHAEL SOYER: But I always regretted that he didn't do more paintings like the one of himself and his mother. That's what I think is the real Gorky. And then when he began to do these abstract, absolutely abstract paintings, he became too repetitious. But then, on the other hand, you know, I met recently the daughter of Arshile Gorky, and she told me that the color schemes of his abstract paintings are absolutely like Armenian rugs. The color scheme. It's absolutely Armenian, which kind of impressed. But then I want to tell you an anecdote, you know, about deKooning—and pertaining to Arshile Gorky. At the exhibition, at the first exhibition

at the Museum of Modern Art, when Arshile Gorky was already dead, they had a big posthumous exhibition, memorial. And we were there, my wife and I. We had a picture there, the self-portrait, and we were invited to the opening. And deKooning was there. And deKooning was drinking a lot then. He got very drunk. And he attached himself to me. Wherever I went, he went, and he made comments about the pictures. And when we came to a certain painting—I don't know which one—he said, "Trouble with Arshile, he had no blood." "He had no blood." He said it to me in my ear. Now, it impressed me. I mean that comment impressed me. From that time on, whenever I look at Arshile Gorky, even at his portrait of himself and his mother, there's something anemic there. There's a certain element of bloodlessness. I feel that way about Arshile Gorky since that remark by deKooning.

MILTON BROWN: Of deKooning, yeah.

RAPHAEL SOYER: I somehow can't get rid of, I can't get this out of my head.

MILTON BROWN: That's interesting. They were very good friends.

RAPHAEL SOYER: I think Arshile is the one who influenced deKooning.

MILTON BROWN: Yeah, he influenced him. Did you know Kline, Franz Kline, at all?

RAPHAEL SOYER: Yes, briefly, also briefly.

MILTON BROWN: Oh.

RAPHAEL SOYER: He was a sick man. I mean he was also an alcoholic.

MILTON BROWN: But he also was a representational painter. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: Yes, I think he had more talent.

MILTON BROWN: . . . quite good. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: I think he had more talent. I think that Gottlieb was a talented fellow. I mean more talented than Rothko.

MILTON BROWN: I've seen some interesting representational paintings of Kline's.

RAPHAEL SOYER: I think that Franz Kline did some kind of. . . . I mean, not extraordinary. I mean, I don't see anything extraordinary about his portraits of that clown.

MILTON BROWN: I don't know them.

RAPHAEL SOYER: But they're not extraordinary.

MILTON BROWN: Yeah.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Everybody painted that way in those days.

MILTON BROWN: Well, what did you think of Pop Art when it showed up? That's a totally different group.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Yeah. Pop Art, yeah. Of the Pop artists, I sometimes liked Wesselmann?

MILTON BROWN: Wesselmann?

RAPHAEL SOYER: I kind of liked his ideas, you know, that big American nude, and kind of. . . . It was something that he got of the. . . . I kind of liked those. I'm not. . . . I'm kind of. . . . They impressed me a little bit, yeah. Wesselmann. I never cared for. . . . There is something cynical about all these Pop artists.

MILTON BROWN: What about. . . . Well, in between those—I don't know if you've ever been interested in them at all, because they were like a transition from Abstract Expressionism to Pop Art, were Jasper Johns and Rauschenberg.

RAPHAEL SOYER: No, I don't like them.

MILTON BROWN: No.

RAPHAEL SOYER: I mean, I really don't. I think it's ridiculous, and I don't call that art, what they do. There's a German guy by the name of Joseph Beuys, is it?

MILTON BROWN: Yeah.

RAPHAEL SOYER: I mean, he outdoes them all, and is crazier than they are. I mean, I don't believe in it.

MILTON BROWN: Well, in more recent years, I mean, in the last decade, even more than that, there's been kind of resurgence of representational art among many young painters and young artists who were brought up in an abstract tradition and have come back, so right now there's. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: Yeah, I think they came a little bit disconnected. I mean they got tired of all that, what's going on in art, and they really began to work more representationally, which is much more interesting. I mean, it, it was more of a challenge to them, you know, to work representationally, and I admire those people who went from abstraction into representationalism. I do admire them. And some of them do very excellent, and very strong work. I mean, maybe they learned something. Maybe abstraction taught them something. Maybe they got something out of it. I mean, a kind of sense of color or sense of composition. It could have been. And they profited something. They profited from working in abstract for a while. But I do admire them for becoming representationalists.
But then on the other hand I think representational art always existed. There's nothing, nothing to make a fuss about it. I mean, it's always existed. And from the very earliest time to the very late time, there were representational painters in Italy and in Germany and great representational paintings. Think of Kokoschka, George Gross, and all these people. They were very wonderful representational painters.
[Interruption in taping]

MILTON BROWN: Well, let's pick up the discussion of realistic art today.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Well, I do admire, as I said before, the artists who, after having been abstract painters, turned and went back to realism, to representationalism. And some of them do very excellent work—from my point of view. But not all representational art is on the same level, you know, on a high level. There's the gratitudinous academic art, you know, which is very banal, and which is repetitious and has no spirit of our time, you know.

MILTON BROWN: Yeah, well, you remember we were just talking about maybe twenty years ago there was a group of young realist painters before the movement sort of got underway, and they were becoming realists and they had studied I think at the Tyler School. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: Yes, yes.

MILTON BROWN: . . . where they were all more or less abstract. And there was Dave Levine and Aaron Shickler. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: Yes.

MILTON BROWN: . . . and Bert Silverman. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: Right, yes.

MILTON BROWN: . . . and, oh, Dinnerstien. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: Dinnerstien, yes.

MILTON BROWN: Harvey Dinnerstein. There was a whole group and they had known each other and they really were programmatic. . . . They wanted to make a kind of statement, to band together and begin a realist movement against abstract art. And I remember because I knew Harvey Dinnerstien's wife Lois, who was teaching at Brooklyn College when I was at Brooklyn College. She said would I come over one evening and look at their work and talk to them about it, and you were also invited and we both ended up, I remember, with a very interesting discussion, and I think you said as. . . . I was very strict with them.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Yes, you were.

MILTON BROWN: I thought they couldn't create a realistic movement out of the late nineteenth-century realism, that realism had to move on, and they were trying to ignore Cézanne. They said like, "Bypass Cézanne." And you also were telling them, I think, that, I think you said that art has to . . . representational art—all art—has to renew itself.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Renew itself. Especially representationalism has to renew itself, because it's an art that existed for so many centuries. And all the great representational art had one iota of its own time. I mean something of its time. And then there's, of course, the academic representationalism that also always existed; it was never in the mainstream of art, you know. They painted representationally landscapes, people, you know. The lesser kind of representational art also always existed. There was always a public for that kind of art. But

that's not the art that we are talking about. I mean, we're talking about real representationalism—living, living art, living representational, and that is something else. Now the group that you talk about, I mean, their idea was just a kind of a protest against abstraction, but they didn't know how to. . . . I mean, just to paint representationally is not a protest against abstraction, you know. And they didn't understand very much. I mean, there was a kind of, a certain provincialism there. I mean, I was amazed how naive they were, I mean, how, how. . . .

MILTON BROWN: They came from Brooklyn. [laughs]

RAPHAEL SOYER: From Brooklyn. . . . how uninspiring their paintings were, you know. I remember that very distinctly—that the work was dull and had no life, no spark, nothing of the life of today. I mean, just copying, copying some kind of artist. They didn't even go to the great, I mean they didn't even copy the great artists, I mean the great representational painters.

MILTON BROWN: Well, you know, it was being very fashionable and chic in a way.

RAPHAEL SOYER: I don't know.

MILTON BROWN: See, they were copying the sketches, the sketches, the sketches of people like Chase and Sargent. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: All right, yes.

MILTON BROWN: . . . and Aikens. Not the major pictures, but the kind of things that Davis and Long—the gallery—were selling.

RAPHAEL SOYER: I remember you were very angry, as a matter of fact, at them, and what they did, they became kind of. . . .

MILTON BROWN: They were upset.

RAPHAEL SOYER: A little upset and felt a little bit. . . . They thought that you will do the opposite, that you would praise them, yes.

MILTON BROWN: They thought I would, I would be. . . . I think they had a feeling that I would be their critic in residence. [laughs]

RAPHAEL SOYER: But anyhow you didn't praise them.

MILTON BROWN: Well, then now if you look around at what's going on, which of the, would you say, the practicing realist painters' work do you find interesting?

RAPHAEL SOYER: I don't care for these photorealists. They bother me. You know, they sometimes. . . . I mean, they're skillful. They have all sorts of techniques. I mean, I don't know just how they do those things. I visited one of those painters in her studio, and it seemed to me more like a, like a photographer's studio, like a Hollywood studio or something—many lights and many. . . .

MILTON BROWN: Who was that?

RAPHAEL SOYER: I don't want to mention the name.

MILTON BROWN: Oh, okay.

RAPHAEL SOYER: It's that young woman. I'll tell you later. But there's one man who kind of amazes me at times—that's Richard Estes.

MILTON BROWN: Yeah, Estes is marvelous.

RAPHAEL SOYER: His pictures. Now, I don't know how he does them, I mean, whether it's a combination of a number of places or what. I mean, his composition's always interesting.

MILTON BROWN: They're actual places.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Are they actual places?

MILTON BROWN: The most famous ones that he did, perhaps ten or fifteen years ago that I know, are on the corner of 72nd Street and Columbus Avenue, which is my neighborhood, and I know all those pictures because they actually don't exist anymore because they've been changed. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: Changed.

MILTON BROWN: . . . so they are now at this point. . . . [chuckling]

RAPHAEL SOYER: Yes.

MILTON BROWN: . . . they're like historic documents.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Historic, yeah.

MILTON BROWN: But I remember the Weiner Drugstore. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: Oh, yeah.

MILTON BROWN: . . . the place that I think had a Needicks or Coca Cola, I forget. I had breakfast there every morning for twenty years.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Well, yes, I mean, somehow there's a certain quality in his work that does not exist in the work of the other people.

MILTON BROWN: Well, that's true. That's very interesting.

RAPHAEL SOYER: He amazes me every once in a while. But then I like say people like. . . . I think Pearlstein I think is a very strong painter. I always had great respect for him. I respect him. He. . . . And there's another artist whose work I saw recently. Downs, is it? Rackstraw? An Englishman. I mean. . . .

MILTON BROWN: Rackstraw Downs?

RAPHAEL SOYER: Downs.

MILTON BROWN: Yeah.

RAPHAEL SOYER: I saw an exhibition of his work, which seemed to me very kind of nice, had a nice quality. Have you seen his work?

MILTON BROWN: No, I don't know him.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Well, I saw an exhibition of his work. He also paints landscapes—city landscapes—and so on, but they were quite. . . . Well, in a sense, they were very beautifully done—I found them to be. I was impressed by his work. Well, and there are a number of younger artists. There's a fellow by the name of Witkin, Witkin—Jerome Witkin—who paints very ambitious pictures, you know. They're a little flamboyant, but representationally strong. A number of. . . . I like Lennart Anderson's work. I think he's quite an excellent painter.

MILTON BROWN: You know, you must know Wayne Thiebaud.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Thiebaud, yeah, that's from the west coast, yeah.

MILTON BROWN: From California, um hmm.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Well, yes. He's a strong painter, too. I several strong pictures by him. As a matter of fact I saw once an exhibition on the west coast—in Los Angeles I think.

MILTON BROWN: Yeah.

RAPHAEL SOYER: I saw an exhibition of his work. I was impressed in a sense. His subject matter sometimes does not interest me when he paints cakes or. . . .

MILTON BROWN: Well, that was early when he was kind of a Pop artist.

RAPHAEL SOYER: That's Pop Art, Pop Art, yeah.

MILTON BROWN: Yeah. But he moved out of that now.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Yeah.

MILTON BROWN: Well the, one of things, since you mentioned Phil Pearlstein who is an old friend and a colleague of mine from Brooklyn when I was at Brooklyn. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: Yeah.

MILTON BROWN: . . . and I've known his work for many years, but. . . . And I agree with you. He's a very, very strong painter, a very powerful painter. But there's an element in his work that bothers me, and I wondered whether it bothered you. And that is a kind of aloofness from the subject.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Aloofness?

MILTON BROWN: Aloofness from the subject—almost as if there is no subject. The people are almost like they don't exist. They're not doing anything.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Yeah, well. . . .

MILTON BROWN: Now, for instance, when, in. . . . Well, maybe I'm old-fashioned or. . . . I have a certain point of view. I remember you also used to do models in the studio and somebody can say, "Well, same model in the same studio," yet when you did a model in the studio somehow she never looked simply like a model who was posing. She always somehow to me was a girl who turned up from the street. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: Yes.

MILTON BROWN: . . . or who came in with her life and somehow even if you didn't tell a story about her, something of that hung on. And with Phil's work I never feel that. The models simply are there. They're. . . . The chair is just as important as. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: Well, that's, that's his work. I mean, that's Phil's work. Now I have a feeling it may be deliberate on his part.

MILTON BROWN: No, I really think it's deliberate.

RAPHAEL SOYER: It is deliberate, yes. And don't forget that in my case I had—I think I mentioned several times, but I mentioned very often—that I had several cultures in me. I mean there's this Russian culture—which has to deal with the psyche a lot, you know with the Russian literature that I read when I was a child. And something of that remained with me, and it, it's reflected in my work. But I think that Philip was an abstract painter at once time?

MILTON BROWN: Yeah, in the beginning.

RAPHAEL SOYER: And to him. . . . I mean I saw some of his works he did. . . . Whatever he does has this element: you call it aloofness? Maybe there is this sense of aloofness.

MILTON BROWN: Being apart, yeah.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Objectivity, a certain objectivity. But I think it's deliberate on his part and there is a certain kind of point of view there. There is a point of view there. I mean that, not to be, well. . . . When you paint the naked woman, I mean, there's an element of sexuality no matter what, I mean. . . .

MILTON BROWN: Yeah, um hmm.

RAPHAEL SOYER: . . . Renoir or Reubens or anybody else, I mean, they. . . . Well, he tries to kind of deliberately paint her like any other object he paints, and in a sense it's a kind of. . . . There's something there that interests me. I mean, it's an interesting point of view. I mean, kind of to paint so coldly and abstractly and so. . . . But what I admire about him is first of all he's a good draftsman. I always like people who can draw, and he can draw very wonderfully. I mean, I think that he can draw feet and hands.

MILTON BROWN: Oh, he's. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: I mean he can draw like a master. And I admire that. That's one of the things that I admire about him. There's also Alex Katz that I like. Every once in a while I like his work, but I think that his work. . . .

JUNE 1, 1981
Tape 3, side B

MILTON BROWN: June first, a remake of the interview with Raphael Soyer with Milton Brown.
All right Raphael, let's try to pick up. I'm sure we won't be able to do it exactly the way we did, or maybe we'll even do a different subject, but let's try to complete the interview. We were interrupted just at the point when you were beginning to talk about Alex Katz.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Well, Alex Katz is another one of those young painters who are representationalists. I think he, I feel that he is a little bit too stylish. For my taste, I mean. I admire. . . . He is also a very good draftsman and very skillful painter, but somehow he's more of the. . . . He paints . . . well. . . . Society people. Somehow I have a feeling that he paints for society—or, you know, that's how his work impresses me. I mean, it's not as rough and as, and. . . . Well, it's somehow a little stylish to say. . . .

MILTON BROWN: Yeah, well.

RAPHAEL SOYER: That's, that's, I can't really put my finger on exactly what bothers me about Alex Katz, the work of Alex Katz. And then another painter is Leslie.

MILTON BROWN: Alfred.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Alfred Leslie, who also is a very . . . courageous painter I think. I mean he too was an abstract painter at one time and kind of I understand a very talented guy. He was also a film maker if I remember correctly. And a strong painter. A little bit too strong for my taste. I mean. . . .

MILTON BROWN: Well, he's even almost brutal sometimes.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Yes, almost brutal. I mean what bothers me about all these painters whom I mentioned—Philip and. . . .

MILTON BROWN: Alex.

RAPHAEL SOYER: . . . Leslie and Alex Katz—is the size of their painting. Why did they have to paint on such a large scale? What's the reason for it? Is it to impress people? To frighten people? To frighten the public? I know that before Christ, I mean, when you look way back, I mean at the work of the Egyptians or the Assyrians, the huge monuments, the huge sculptures, you know, of kings and gods, I mean, those were done deliberately to frighten people. But what is the reason for these young American painters to paint so big? Is it still the remains of Abstract Expressionism? Or is there another reason to it? I simply don't see any, any explanation for it. I don't know why. Again, to impress? I know size is impressive, but I don't think that, that. . . .

MILTON BROWN: Well, it can also get empty.

RAPHAEL SOYER: It can get very empty. But nevertheless, it was never explained to me.

MILTON BROWN: Well, I think it, they probably. . . . I think they inherited size. They inherited it not only from Abstract Expressionists, but the abstract artist. . . . Well, the Abstract Expressionists were the most. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: As a matter of fact, so many of them today, no matter what the "ism" is, size is important. Even if it's a completely or almost an empty canvas, it has to be big, has to be big, has to be large.

MILTON BROWN: Well, that's interested me too, Raphael, for a long time. And I think that the Abstract Expressionists inherited it from the thirties, from the mural painters of the thirties. In a strange way, from the Mexican mural painters and all of the mural art—the public art of the thirties.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Well, uh. . . .

MILTON BROWN: One of the strange paradoxes was that these people wanted to be as public—as private as they were in their interior feelings—they wanted their art to be communicative and public, and they depended on size in a way.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Well, you see, I mean, I understand when Michaelangelo painted huge murals, or Rivera and Orozco painted huge murals. I understand that. I mean, those were murals, as you said, for the public. They covered huge walls. They told great stories, great historical stories, of great themes in those paintings, and I can understand the size of those things, but I couldn't understand why say a portrait of, by Leslie, of some kind of a tycoon is done five times the size of life. Or why Philip Pearlstein paints his children about three or four times the size they are. You see? And these are different things, and they. . . .

MILTON BROWN: Maybe these are. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: . . . don't call for largeness, for big, big size. I mean, I like, say, a little painting of a child by Corot, which to me is much more valid and much more beautiful than a huge inflated portrait of a child. Or a huge portrait of a man, a rich man, you know. I can't understand those things.

MILTON BROWN: Well, scale has become part of their way of thinking, so that if, for instance, if some of the photo realists like Chuck Close. . . . When he blows up a head to that size, you begin to see it in a way that you

never saw it before and the effect is to try to get you to look at it.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Well, to me a portrait by Holbein or Van Der Weyden, or vanEyck, small portraits are much deeper and much more fantastic. I mean, they're done by hand. The camera wasn't there. The camera eye wasn't there. They were done by the artist's hand, mind, heart, and so on. And those to me are much more impressive. I mean, I can look at them for a long time.
I saw once an exhibition of those huge heads, you know, and really I . . . they seemed to me kind of empty. Just blown-up photographs.

MILTON BROWN: Maybe they are supposed to frighten you.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Well. . . . To frighten? Well, why should they frighten? What's the reason for art to frighten?

MILTON BROWN: I don't know. [chuckling]

RAPHAEL SOYER: I mean I understand. . . .

MILTON BROWN: Well, maybe not frighten you. We don't frighten that easily but. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: Well, I think it's maybe to frighten.

MILTON BROWN: To grab your attention.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Well, I prefer it being done in different ways.

MILTON BROWN: Yeah, but so much in contemporary art moves from point to point and gets in some ways in terms of sex, gets more explicit, so that movies are more open, painting is more open.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Yes. Oh, yes, but. . . .

MILTON BROWN: All sorts of things that previously you didn't have now exist.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Right, but I still don't see the reason for magnifying a human being to such an extent as they do in their paintings.

MILTON BROWN: Yeah.

RAPHAEL SOYER: I don't see any reason. And I think one should call attention to those things for once, I mean. And just try to understand why, why they do those things.

MILTON BROWN: You're raising a very interesting question, because if you think back at the late nineteenth century, all the great painters of the Impressionist and post-Impressionist time essentially painted small pictures for homes. I mean, they fit into. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: Van Gogh, he never painted a large painting.

MILTON BROWN: Right.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Never did a big painting.

MILTON BROWN: Maybe he couldn't afford the canvas or the paint.

RAPHAEL SOYER: May be. Gaugin painted one large painting, but a very kind of interesting, interesting subject, idea. That's. . . .

MILTON BROWN: But then when they began to paint for museums and public places, you couldn't paint small anymore. Rothko finally—like Giotto—decorated a chapel in Houston.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Well, listen, Giotto is one thing, and Rothko's chapel is something else.

MILTON BROWN: I'm not asking you to make a judgment. [laughs]

RAPHAEL SOYER: I know. I'm not trying to make a judgment, but. . . .

MILTON BROWN: But the fact is that they both did chapels, and scale in the chapel is important.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Yeah, well.

MILTON BROWN: Which maybe, I'm only trying to suggest.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Okay, okay, okay, I'll give in to it. Okay, Rothko painted for a chapel.

MILTON BROWN: Yeah.

RAPHAEL SOYER: And he painted big pictures, yeah, big, big canvases. I don't know where they are. But why should one like Alex Katz, I saw a painting of a dog blown up to one hundred times the size of the dog, a poodle. Why, what's the reason for that? Or what's the reason for painting a child, let's say five times the size he is? That's not for chapels or for anything.

MILTON BROWN: Yeah.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Or why should artists paint just for museums or have in mind museums and therefore paint large pictures? Why should they have that in mind, that, that. . . .

MILTON BROWN: That's where the business is, I suppose.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Well, why should they think of business? Artists?

MILTON BROWN: Well. . . . That's another good question.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Eh? Yes.

MILTON BROWN: I'm not here to answer questions, Raphael. I'm here to ask 'em. [chuckling]

RAPHAEL SOYER: Yes. Yes. That's no reason to paint huge pictures because in museums. . . . In Texas, I mean they build big museums that are absolutely empty, and they have to fill them up with huge empty canvases?

MILTON BROWN: Well, maybe that's an answer.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Yes.

MILTON BROWN: Well, where do you see. . . . Where do you think realism, representational art, will go from here? Do you have any notions? Do you have anything to tell younger artists about what they should be careful of?

RAPHAEL SOYER: Well, there may be a reason for all those things that I am kind of bellyaching about. I think that our civilization is not amenable to art. That's all. It's a technological civilization, and what the artists used to do can be done technologically today. To paint portraits, to paint compositions, to describe what happened in Vietnam, or so on. They don't need any Delacroix anymore who painted the Massacre at Chiaos. You see, I mean technology is. . . . At one time when [the—Ed.] coronation of Napoleon took place, there was David, who painted this magnificent, huge painting at the Louvre. There's nobody, no genius, no so-called demigod of today could do this. Just, they couldn't. They didn't have the training nor the talent nor the . . . to sustain a thing like that. It's all I think because technology took over. I mean, when there is a coronation of a, a inauguration of a president, there's the TV, there're the cameras and the movies and everything else. Or when there is a war in Vietnam, they don't need anymore a Winslow Homer to go to be a reporter. I mean, again they have those. Or you want to have a portrait painted of yourself? They can take a magnificent photograph of you. I mean, you don't need a Vandyke or a Van Eyck or a Van Der Weyden to do your portrait.
I think that this is the reason to me for a kind of confusion among artists, or in them, or confusion in art. The artists simply don't know what to do with themselves. They're not absolutely needed by our technological civilization, so they try to do almost anything to call attention to themselves, and to do crazy things at times, to have an empty canvas and say it's a work of art. I saw those things. And I think this is our society, the technology today that took over. Took over what the artists used to do. They can do very well with photography, I mean, what the artist used to do. I mean generally speaking. There are of course artists, there are people who still want to express themselves, still want to do something that they look at, they see, and they want, they see it in their own personal way, and they have a desire to communicate, you see. But it's difficult, it's difficult. And it's difficult, very difficult for representational painters. I mean, representationalism existed so long, such a long time, that, you know, it's difficult to be a representational painter of today. I mean, so many things are unpaintable anymore. I used to paint New York streets at one time, and I loved perspective and I loved space, and now the streets are devoured by traffic. There's no perspective anymore, no space anymore, and everything is so on top of you. So it's impossible really to stand in the middle of the street like I used to do in the late 1920s or early 1930s and paint those wide streets. Which I loved to do. They were beautiful. But today maybe it's still possible to do those things. There's a group of artists called "Street Painters," and they go to Times Square in bunches, and they paint everything—I mean, the signs, the traffic, maybe they're quite courageous.

MILTON BROWN: Well, many of 'em take photographs and then paint them.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Well, maybe they paint from photographs. I don't know. But I remember it used to be so. . . . I felt. . . . It was so idyllic to stand in the middle of the street, empty street, with just a few people there, and paint. And I love perspective. I love space. But it's gone now in New York City. You can't do it anymore. So that our, as I said, our civilization is so different from any civilization that ever was, and it's not very amenable, as I've said, for art. For art. For things to be done by hand. You know? They used to make shoes by hand. I remember my father took me to a cap maker and made me a hat by, a cap, by a, a man who made hats—by hand. But today everything is done by machine.

MILTON BROWN: Um hmm.

RAPHAEL SOYER: So art is also being done by the camera.

MILTON BROWN: So what is left for a young painter?

RAPHAEL SOYER: Well, that's the tragedy. I mean, I don't know what is left. There's still a desire on the part of many young artists to draw. There must be a kind of inner desire—I mean a very strong instinctive desire to draw, to look at things, and to draw through yourself, to represent things through yourself. That still exists.

MILTON BROWN: Well, maybe. . . . There may be, Raphael, a great many. . . . Maybe a great many young artists retreat or run, retreat into the realm of abstraction because they feel they can't paint the world around them.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Well, that's what I mean. I mean, that's what I say. I mean they retreat into many realms. . . .

MILTON BROWN: Yeah, different.

RAPHAEL SOYER: . . . not only abstraction. I mean, it's because they don't know what to do anymore.

MILTON BROWN: Um hmm.

RAPHAEL SOYER: And that's a tragedy. I saw several years ago The Burial of Count Orance in Toledo, by El Greco. Well, there's no genius today or, you know, so called proclaimed geniuses, who could do anything like it. I mean just impossible. I mean, they can't do it.

MILTON BROWN: Well, that's a stupendous painting.

RAPHAEL SOYER: No, they can't do it. They can't. They haven't got the power. They haven't got the strength. They haven't got the drive, I mean, to a thing like that. You see. Everything became small. I mean, the large painting that they make in big size, I mean, the big size, they're not.

MILTON BROWN: Well, that's true. That was a big painting.

RAPHAEL SOYER: That was a big painting, but it had a reason. I mean, the content. . . . I mean, there was tremendous content there. This world, next world. I mean, it was a terrific content. Terrific imagination.

MILTON BROWN: Well, Goya's Second of May, you know, was a big painting, too.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Second of May was a big painting, yeah. But those had content, as I mentioned before.

MILTON BROWN: Or Veronese's Supper at Canaan.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Veronese's huge paintings, yes, wonderful, yes, magnificent. Courbet I think was the last great painter of this style.

MILTON BROWN: Of size.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Of size. But his studio painting _____.

MILTON BROWN: Well, in a strange way I suppose we forget now, as things get closer, that Monet's waterlilies were big pictures.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Yes, yes, yes.

MILTON BROWN: Beautiful pictures.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Beautiful.

MILTON BROWN: And Picasso's Guernica is a. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: Well, I never was crazy about Guernica.

MILTON BROWN: You weren't.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Strangely enough, I know, I never was taken by Guernica. I was much more impressed by other. . . . Say by Delacroix's Massacre at Chiaos. . . .

MILTON BROWN: At Chiaos.

RAPHAEL SOYER: . . . which is so far removed from my time and so far away from me. And they were in Spain with the Spanish Civil War, I was very much involved, and still this painting of Massacre at Chiaos seemed more a painting of that type. I mean, more real, more real, you see. And I saw a study for it, just the mother with the child, the living child clinging to the breast of the dead mother. I saw it in Prague, in the museum. Well, I think it was like something out of the war in Vietnam, you know, or in Civil War. Like something out of the Civil War in Spain, absolutely.

MILTON BROWN: Yeah.

RAPHAEL SOYER: I saw some photographs of a child running naked down the middle of the street.

MILTON BROWN: Well, but I think that Picasso's Woman With a Dead Child clutched to her breast. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: [Naked].

MILTON BROWN: . . . is, is, it's not. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: That's _____ Dela_____.

MILTON BROWN: . . . it's taken from Delacroix. Not taken, but it certainly influenced.

RAPHAEL SOYER: But you see there is no woman, a child.

MILTON BROWN: Oh, yeah, the central woman.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Yes, but it's a kind of a different kind. . . .

MILTON BROWN: You know the, in the same way.

RAPHAEL SOYER: . . . different kind of woman, different kind of child, different kind of. . . .

MILTON BROWN: No, but he, he. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: But to me it's, you know, size again, size is impressive, you know. It could have been, if it were small it would have been not so impressive. I saw once an etching, an etching by Otto Dix, somewhere in Germany, of a plane, one of those early planes, flying low and bombing, and women and children running, just an etching. If that were enlarged the size of Guernica, I think it would have been much more impressive. And much more accurate, much more real. I believe in reality. I believe in absolutely real representation.

MILTON BROWN: Um hmm.

RAPHAEL SOYER: You know, it's. . . . You know, it's amazing how many people accepted Guernica. Even Franco accepted it. Maybe it's not so terrible, I mean not such a terrible painting. I mean, it's a kind of an acceptable thing. I mean Franco accepted it. The Communists accepted it.

MILTON BROWN: Well, maybe it's because. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: Everyone accepted it.

MILTON BROWN: Yeah.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Artists accepted. I somehow couldn't see Guernica. I couldn't see it.

MILTON BROWN: Well, maybe because it remains enigmatic. It doesn't. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: I don't know. I don't think great art is enigmatic. I mean, great art is not enigmatic. I don't know any great enigmatic painting ever done. They very, very real and very gripping, very representational. I don't believe in symbolism too much, no matter how much theorizing is being done about it.

MILTON BROWN: Well, I think Raphael we sort of came to the end—unless there's anything else you would like to say.

RAPHAEL SOYER: No, but, no, I'll talk about representational painters.

MILTON BROWN: Yeah.

RAPHAEL SOYER: We talked about young representationalists.

MILTON BROWN: Yeah.

RAPHAEL SOYER: There were some older representational painters always existed no matter what the "ism" was. I know that I have great feelings for a woman like Alice Neal. I think she's a very strong painter, very strong representational painter. I like the work of Isabel Bishop. I like, of course, Edward Hopper. I mean, these people painted representationally no matter what took place, what "ism" was popular or approved of by the cognoscenti, and so on. They went on and went their own way. And I think that's important, you know, to mention these people.

MILTON BROWN: Yes, well, like. . . . I think it's true the realist tradition continues. It never stopped. It's certainly is. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: No, it always existed, always existed, and this business of going back to realism or kind of. . . . I think it's a little bit too much of a fuss that's being made about it.

MILTON BROWN: Well, for the younger people, because they didn't have that tradition, they have to make a fuss, I suppose.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Well, it's. . . . Well, it's. . . .

MILTON BROWN: They have to discover something.

RAPHAEL SOYER: It's terrible that this was, that there is a lost generation of young artists.

MILTON BROWN: Yeah, well. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: There was, there is, there was a generation, a lost generation, of young artists. It's a terrible thing.

MILTON BROWN: Well, they seem to have found their way finally.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Well, that's okay.

MILTON BROWN: Yeah.

RAPHAEL SOYER: It will take a long time, I mean. I still don't understand, I mean, the, the reason for the abrupt advent and success of all those "isms." You know, I have a theory.

MILTON BROWN: Go ahead. Let's hear the theory. Everybody has a theory.

RAPHAEL SOYER: It may be, it may be. . . . That was during the Cold War. I mean that was in the 1950s, middle 1950s, during the very Cold War, during McCarthyism, during this Cold War against the Soviet Union. And now, the Soviet Union actually became terribly representational, was terrible representational—anecdotal. . . . Everything that's bad about representationalism, the Soviet Union was. And the idea to be against the Soviet Union probably created this anti-representationalism among the Americans.

MILTON BROWN: [chuckles]

RAPHAEL SOYER: And, as I remember, the Museum of Modern Art had a lot to do, Mr. Barr had a lot to do with that. Had a great deal to do with it. When we got this magazine out, this Reality magazine, and the members were Edward Hopper, Henry Poor, Yas Kuniyoshi—I mean all this type of people, you know—who had absolutely nothing to do with Communism or anything else. But we were warned not to be influenced by Communism, because we came out for reality in art.

MILTON BROWN: Yeah.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Now isn't that something? Now isn't there some kind of possibility, that the Cold War had influenced, had created, or helped create abstraction?

MILTON BROWN: Well, it's possible. You know, there are some people who've. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: And you know what? In those days there were exhibitions sent by the government to many other countries, and there was never representational art. There was always abstract art.

MILTON BROWN: Well, that's been pointed out before.

RAPHAEL SOYER: It has been pointed out?

MILTON BROWN: Yeah, that that's a possibility. There also is another possibility that's worth looking into, that this is essentially an elitist art.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Elitist.

MILTON BROWN: Elitist art. Now in the United States, in capitalist societies, there is a representational art for the people that always exists, and that was commercial art.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Yeah, well, we're not talking about, we're not. . . .

MILTON BROWN: Yeah, but as long as. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: We're not talking, that's something else. It's not in the mainstream of art. It's not what we're talking about. That's something else again. And even there always exists a certain kind of representational art that has a great public still—which is banal, gratitudinous, and so on. But we're not talking about that.

MILTON BROWN: Right.

RAPHAEL SOYER: We're talking about the Hoppers, the, the. . . . Say, the artists of that type who persevered, I mean, who kept on painting the way and what they believed. Hopper did that.

MILTON BROWN: Yeah, but they would. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: I wonder. I really wonder. I mean, what. . . . Now people like. . . . Now is this still on, this recorder?

MILTON BROWN: Yeah.

RAPHAEL SOYER: I don't want to be too personal, I mean, but I do, I mean to me it's a. . . .

MILTON BROWN: Yeah, please. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: [very open] a question. I mean, how did it happen, that people say like Adolph Gottlieb. I mention, I'm mentioning the name, Jack. . . . Well, _____ _____, but I mean Rothko. . . .

MILTON BROWN: Jackson Pollack, Rothko. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: . . . Jackson Pollack and so on.

MILTON BROWN: DeKooning.

RAPHAEL SOYER: DeKooning. I mean, they were all right. I mean maybe deKooning did one or several good drawings. He was a commercial artist and he had to know how to draw. He did a couple of good drawings, but not the best kind of drawings. Certainly Degas was a better draftsman and so on. The other artists I know they were kind of ordinary painters. I mean there was nothing great about them. They painted like everybody painted in those days. I think it's a little bit different. I think. Because to me the way they painted was in a kind of a, a, maybe. . . . But then all of a sudden, overnight, they became abstract painters, and they became famous, and became very much advertised, and so on, you see. I'd like to know how this happened, or why. I know that Jackson, Jackson Pollack probably was a kind of talented guy. I mean he would, at best he could imitate Ryder, maybe, or Thomas Benton, but nothing extraordinary. I mean, nothing wonderful. Or another guy I know was kind of a lazy guy, I mean, just. . . . I'm not going to mention his name. He became very famous. And his paintings are almost empty. He gives them very fancy titles, but there's nothing there. But they all became very famous—very quickly and very soon, and I really don't, I still do not know why it happened.

MILTON BROWN: Well, that's a very difficult question, but it. . . . However, it didn't happen overnight I feel.

RAPHAEL SOYER: But of course there was a club. . . .

MILTON BROWN: It took a, took a long. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: They used to go to a club, and so on and so on. Politically they were in a kind of a movement that that was. . . .

MILTON BROWN: They were anti-representational.

RAPHAEL SOYER: They were anti-representational. They were anti. . . . Well, if I may say so they were . . . Trotskyites? [chuckles]

MILTON BROWN: Oh. Well, some were involved in politics, I know.

RAPHAEL SOYER: But they were politically involved in certain way. I mean, they were against power, I mean. . . . And they were intelligent, they were intelligent, and they had good spokesmen—very sincere and honest spokesmen, like Meyer Schapiro was their defender. I mean he talked too much and he talked in circles very often, but nevertheless he's a very eloquent fellow and he defended them.

MILTON BROWN: Yes.

RAPHAEL SOYER: And they had many defenders, many, many people who spoke for them. I remember when we started the Reality magazine, I said to the artists, let's get writers who are able to promulgate ideas and so on. But, no, they wanted to talk themselves. They wanted to write it.

MILTON BROWN: Write.

RAPHAEL SOYER: And they very soon wrote themselves out, and there was nothing, they couldn't extend anymore, I mean, their ideas. And it stopped, you know, the Reality magazine.

MILTON BROWN: Well, to a certain extent I think that it was during the thirties—certainly twenties and thirties. . . . Well, in the early part of the century, European art had become dominant and as European art moved toward abstraction, the American, the whole section of American art, wanted to imitate that.

RAPHAEL SOYER: You mean the European abstract, the Russian abstract art?

MILTON BROWN: Not only Russian, but French, and they were dominant after. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: Were they before?

MILTON BROWN: They were before, yeah.

RAPHAEL SOYER: They were before.

MILTON BROWN: But, after all, the Museum of Modern Art was giving the big shows to the European abstract painters, not necessarily the Americans.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Yes, in the beginning.

MILTON BROWN: When the Americans finally seemed to catch on—to catch up as it were—with the Europeans, it looked almost as if they had displaced them. See, the, the whole drive in an international sense was along the lines of abstraction, not toward reality, so that reality had become almost a recessive characteristic during those years. And then it looked almost as if America had finally overtaken Europe, and then when the American painters were taking the thunder away from the big names in Europe, all the dealers and the museums here became very excited, and it's at that point that the State Department. . . . The State Department used to send contemporary American art abroad, and some of it was, I don't know how radical, but you remember how Dondero made a whole big stink and the whole exhibition was brought back because everybody there was supposed to be a leftist.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Right.

MILTON BROWN: So from then on they didn't like to send pictures that had subject matter that was interpretable in any particular way.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Well, that interests me because I didn't know about this Dondero and an exhibition being sent and then. . . .

MILTON BROWN: Don't you remember that? There was a national exhibition. It included. . . . You were in it I'm sure. Jack Levine was in it. Ben Shahn. As a matter of fact, there was an old friend of mine, Leroy Davidson, who got the show together, I think for the State Department, right after the war, and it was sent abroad and it was called back.

RAPHAEL SOYER: No, I wasn't aware. . . .

MILTON BROWN: Because it made such a stink because the Congress suddenly discovered that there were left-wing artists that we were sending abroad. So that when Henry Luce of Life could look at all of these men and women as—a few women—who were creating a new American art, Abstract Expressionism, he said this was the American century, this was the. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: Who was that? Henry Luce?

MILTON BROWN: Henry Luce. This was the art of the American century. For the first time, it was almost obvious that he was calling for [chuckles] an imperialist art, in a sense. That this art was the equivalent of our position in relationship to Russia in the Cold War. Now it may not have been open, but for a lot of people, it, for the first time American art was dominant in the world, and everybody began to imitate American art.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Yes.

MILTON BROWN: So it took on an imperial character. I think Max Kosloff wrote an article about that, a very interesting one, about Abstract Expressionism and the Cold War, which points out a lot of these contradictions and paradoxes and. . . . Fascinating.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Yes, well, anyhow.

MILTON BROWN: But that's changed now, see, now it's. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: It's changing?

MILTON BROWN: Yeah. It isn't the same as it was before. I mean. . . . I don't that there are many younger painters who are trying to be Abstract Expressionists now. They've moved beyond that in other directions, and a great many of them have come back, as we've been talking, to realism.

RAPHAEL SOYER: So there are Rauschenbergs, and Jasper Johnses, and this type of work.

MILTON BROWN: They're still the big names but they're already an older generation.

RAPHAEL SOYER: But I don't know. I don't know of any time when art was so promulgated, when art was so praised, as it was during the period of Rothko and Jackson Pollack, and. . . . I mean, there were great artists, my goodness, and nobody paid so much attention about them. Albert Ryder, I remember in my time. I mean, nobody wrote about him too much. I mean, I don't mind terribly about Ryder, but I remember Thomas Eakins. I mean, long after he died, a little book came out, and then, then another book, that's all. And I think he's the great American painter. He's our Courbet. I mean, we haven't got anybody like that in art. And this business of the triumph of American art. The triumph of American art. There's even a book called The Triumph of American Art. Sandler I think wrote it. I don't see what kind of a triumph we. . . . When I look at their paintings, it's really. . . . It makes me feel sad if this is the triumph.

MILTON BROWN: Well, but you see the title tells you what they want it to be.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Huh?

MILTON BROWN: The title tells you what they want it to be—or what they expect it to be. It's a triumph, and that's why they're for it. I mean. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: It's a sad triumph to me.

MILTON BROWN: Well. . . .

RAPHAEL SOYER: As far as art is concerned, as far as actually painting. I mean to me it's a very sad triumph, I must say. And nobody can convince me that Franz Kline produced a great work of art. Nobody can convince me. Impossible. I've been painting all my life, and I think I know a little bit about what painting is. I cannot be convinced that this—no theory, no theorizing, no speculation, no nothing—nothing can convince me that this is a triumph in art.

MILTON BROWN: Um hmm.

RAPHAEL SOYER: And certainly a Giotto chapel impresses me even today has more meaning to me than a Rothko chapel.

MILTON BROWN: Um hmm.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Much more meaning. Because there's humanity there, there are gestures, there's compassion, supplication, all these wonderful things that a great work of art has. And the abstract talent is there so the element of abstraction is certainly there.

MILTON BROWN: Well, question always remains, what we're faced with, is which way is it going to go now?

RAPHAEL SOYER: I don't know. As I said, I mean, I have a feeling it'll go on. I mean, there'll always be a desire to paint. I mean, to paint the visible world through one's self—I mean, through one's self. Probably we'll always. . . . But you know if it's not needed, I mean, if it's not demanded, if society, if civilization does not need it as desperately, as absolutely as it needed it before technology, you know, it becomes weak. I mean, art is weak because one doesn't need; one can do without. You know. It's not bread, you know. One can do without it. And then they have the technology that does what the artist used to do.

MILTON BROWN: Well, maybe this is the end.

RAPHAEL SOYER: Who knows.

MILTON BROWN: It's the end of this. . . . It's also the end of the tape.

END OF INTERVIEW

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