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Oral history interview with Estelle Gross, 1989 Apr. 5

Funding for the digital preservation of this interview was provided by a grant from the Save America's Treasures Program of the National Park Service. This interview received support from the Smithsonian American Women's History Initiative Pool.

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Estelle Shane Gross on April 5, 1989. The interview took place in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and was conducted by Marina Pacini for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

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

Interview

[00:00:04.10]

MARINA PACINI: This is Marina Pacini interviewing Estelle Gross for the Archives of American Art. It's April 4th, 1989.

[00:00:11.98]

ESTELLE GROSS: It's April 5th.

[00:00:12.74]

MARINA PACINI: April 5th, 1989. And we are at the Gross Gross McCleaf Gallery in Philadelphia. The first question I have for you is, could you talk about your family background, what your parents did?

[00:00:27.04]

ESTELLE GROSS: All right. My parents didn't come to this country until the 1920s. They both escaped from Russia, although they were both with the army. My father was a—what do you call them? He rode on a horse, which he was very proud of. And my mother was with the intelligence. They were also on the wrong side. So they bribed a guard with a gold watch, rode across the Dnipro River, and made their way to the United States.

And I was born about two years after they got here. And I have a twin. I have a twin brother. And there was some space, and then I have a sister who's seven years younger than I, who is an artist, and another brother who is ten years younger than I, who is a professor of mathematics at the City University of New York's Baruch College.

[00:01:38.62]

So as a child, my parents, I think, were very typical of New York intellectual Jews. Their

friends all played the violin. They all read socialist literature. And my mother's brother taught Dialectic Materialism at the New School. My mother was liberal way before Dr. Spock. And she permitted me to draw on the flyleaf of every single book she had. There was not an undecorated book in the whole house. If it was a paper and it held still, I worked on it.

And when I was twelve and had braces on my teeth, I discovered the Museum of Modern Art, which was down the street from the orthodontist. And I wandered in there. And I loved it from the moment I set foot in it. Picasso's Guernica was at the top of the stairs. Tchelitchew had a big painting. I still remember. It was wonderful. I went every single week. I went all by myself. And I think people who are going to be artists or who are going to be in this business love art. It's not something that's taught to you. The rest of it, the business acumen, and the information about art and aesthetics, that comes later. But as a child, I knew that—it's not that I wanted to be an artist. But that's what I wanted to be, where the art was.

[00:03:14.30]

MARINA PACINI: So did your parents have any interest—you said that they played musical instruments. Were they also interested in art? Or was this something you developed totally on your own?

[00:03:23.98]

ESTELLE GROSS: Oh no, they weren't the least bit interested in art. They were more interested in politics, and of course, in making their way with four children. It wasn't easy. But they encouraged me, because I remember that they sent me to Saturday classes for children at Pratt Institute. And that was in Brooklyn. And that was a good way from our little town of Lawrence in Long Island. That's where we lived.

[00:03:57.09]

MARINA PACINI: How old were you when you were studying at Pratt?

[00:04:01.88]

ESTELLE GROSS: I would say I must have been between ten and twelve, because in those days, they rushed you through school. So by the time I was twelve, I finished the eighth grade. I did not finish high school. I took a competitive exam; I went to college. And I went through college in three years because the Second World War was on. So I really was quite young when I got out of college. And then I went on to Parsons, and got married. I had won Parsons' scholarship to Paris. I decided to get married instead. And we ended up in Paris on our honeymoon. And again, that was the first time I'd ever seen Paris and the school of Paris. And we went down to Valery. And this was 1947. So it's always been an interest. It's like an unbroken line for me.

[00:05:03.88]

MARINA PACINI: I find it interesting that your parents weren't really interested in art, and yet you and your sister both ended up pursuing it.

[00:05:11.70]

ESTELLE GROSS: Well, I think—my dad was a dress manufacturer, and I think he had a great eye for texture and color. And he was very, very sensitive to how things looked. I think my mother had beautiful taste. She made all my clothes until I went to college, and even when I went to college. She would have made my trousseau if I'd let her. But I don't know why. My sister now is in personnel. She's no longer an artist.

[00:05:40.79]

MARINA PACINI: Okay. So you studied at Pratt. Can you talk a little—

[00:05:47.86]

ESTELLE GROSS: Just as a child.

[00:05:49.03]

MARINA PACINI: Okay. What was it like at Parsons? How long were you at Parsons?

[00:05:53.26]

ESTELLE GROSS: Well, when I was at Parson, that was really postgraduate.

[00:05:56.38]

MARINA PACINI: Okay.

[00:05:56.89]

ESTELLE GROSS: Because I went Penn State, where I went what they called an unscheduled class. It was "1940" with a question mark at the end because you could go at your own pace. As long as you made Dean's List, you could go on taking as many credits as possible. So I had a mentor, a woman professor, who suggested that I go to Parsons, from which she had graduated, and she was kind enough to really propose me to them.

And I came up with my portfolio, and they put me in the second-year class rather than the third. And again, the woman there was very kind to me, and she offered me the scholarship to their school in Paris. By then I had become engaged, and I opted to get married. But as I say, we went to Paris. And I discovered, rediscovered I should say, the French school.

[00:06:58.90]

MARINA PACINI: Okay. Were you taking art classes when you were at Penn State?

[00:07:03.10]

ESTELLE GROSS: That was my major.

[00:07:04.30]

MARINA PACINI: Okay. Is this where you studied with Hobson Pittman?

[00:07:07.49]

ESTELLE GROSS: No. No. You know, I didn't even know about Hobson Pittman. I had no idea.

[00:07:13.05]

MARINA PACINI: Okay.

[00:07:14.62]

ESTELLE GROSS: I don't even know if he were teaching at Penn State then.

[00:07:17.72]

MARINA PACINI: At that point, no. I think it's the '50s where he does that summer school thing. So, yeah.

[00:07:22.37]

ESTELLE GROSS: I was married in '47.

[00:07:24.05]

MARINA PACINI: Okay.

[00:07:27.55]

ESTELLE GROSS: That's funny. No. But after I got married, I taught children's classes at 132 South 18th Street. I don't know what's there now. But this one gallery I think is on the first floor. There was a man named D. Roy Miller.

[00:07:42.73]

MARINA PACINI: D. Roy?

[00:07:43.51]

ESTELLE GROSS: D, period, Roy Miller. And I also taught art classes at Valley Forge Chapel. And then of course, I discovered I was going to have a baby, and did, and then had another one. And when my children were two and four, I went back to graduate school at Temple University. And because I did not have a car, I ended up taking my MA in English literature. Although, I would have preferred to have gone to Tyler and taken studio courses. I just couldn't do that.

[00:08:27.79]

MARINA PACINI: It was too far out?

[00:08:29.27]

ESTELLE GROSS: Well, it was public transportation, and it didn't exist really from where we lived, so it was easier to take public transportation down to Broad Street. And so I got my MA in English literature, which was fine, which was fine. It went along with my general interest in any case. And right after that, I went to—oh, I went back and got accreditation to teach art and English. So I got—I forget what they call that—certification, I guess. And then I immediately began to work at Bell Savings Bank. And I did their promotional work and their advertising for three years.

[00:09:26.02]

And I guess I should mention that when I first came to Philadelphia, what I did in between teaching was, I modeled fur coats, believe it or not. And I walked up and down a runway. Anyway, after I worked at Bell Savings for a while, I was asked by Aaron T. Beck, Dr. Beck, to work for him as a research assistant because I had the credentials to do bibliographical work. And I worked for him for over three years on a book called *Depression*. It was the definitive book on depression at the time. And Dr. Beck is still active.

[00:10:17.32]

While we were finishing up the book, I had been asked by two or three people to get together with them and open an art gallery. And my husband really encouraged me to go out on my own. He felt that I did not really need a partner. However, I had an agreement, which I made with a young man named McCleaf. And since I was still obligated to work at the University of Pennsylvania for Dr. Beck, Marlin McCleaf was to run the gallery. Unfortunately, he was having marital problems, and he and his wife broke up, and he left, and I simply stepped in and took over. I didn't have a choice. And that's how we got the name Gross McCleaf.

[00:11:05.65]

MARINA PACINI: Okay. And this is in 1969.

[00:11:08.05]

ESTELLE GROSS: This is in 1969, yes.

[00:11:10.67]

MARINA PACINI: Okay, before we go on, I want to ask you one question. How did you get from New York to Philadelphia?

[00:11:17.29]

ESTELLE GROSS: I got married to a Philadelphian.

[00:11:19.32]

MARINA PACINI: Okay. Okay. Solves that problem. Okay, well, let's talk about how the gallery got started. Had he already figured out which artists he wanted to represent? Was it just going to be showcasing?

[00:11:37.54]

ESTELLE GROSS: Marlin had no—Marlin had never been outside—he was a Pennsylvanian, but he'd really never been to New York at all. He was very young. And I'm trying to remember. I had been a guide at the [Philadelphia –Ed.] Art Museum for about five years. This was long before they had any stipulations. The Junior League was actually running it.

[00:12:04.20]

And before that, I'd studied for Hobson Pittman. So I was sort of familiar with the museum. And I forget who asked me if I would study up on one of the Gray Line tours and give the tour over the summer, which I did. And part of the reason I started the gallery—I mean, it's funny the people who encourage you. I happened to tell Hobson one day about my husband saying that I could do this on my own. His expression was that "they're not asking you to run General Motors. It's just an art gallery." And Hobson was very encouraging. [Laughs.] And I think he felt that I was never going to be a great artist, that I could be a competent art director, or art gallery director, I should say.

[00:12:58.22]

And he told me that if I started a gallery that he would show with me. And he did not show in Philadelphia. I forget who his dealer was in New York at the time. He had more than one dealer in New York as a matter of fact. And of course, he had a dealer in North Carolina. And by the way, he did exactly that. In 1970, when he was 70 years old, we had a fantastic show for Hobson, brought a lot of work back. And I think that was probably the biggest show he ever had in a commercial gallery in Philadelphia.

[00:13:33.83]

MARINA PACINI: That's interesting. Do you have any idea why? Was he just not interested in exhibiting in Philly?

[00:13:39.53]

ESTELLE GROSS: Well, you know, I really don't know why. That would be a guess. I really don't. Maybe because he had a dealer in New York. Maybe he really couldn't supply anybody with more than that. Maybe his dealer didn't want the competition. I don't know.

[00:13:54.44]

MARINA PACINI: Hmm. Okay. But the first exhibitions were Fairfield Porter and Neil Welliver. Do you know how those came about?

[00:14:02.99]

ESTELLE GROSS: Oh, sure. Well, Fairfield Porter grew right out of my tour as a guide at the art museum because I used to take people through the Eakins room. And only Fairfield Porter at that time had written a monograph on Eakins. And I had used it. I became interested in Porter when I realized that he wrote criticism. I began to read his criticism, and then realized he was a painter. I saw his work and loved it. I went all the way up to—[Telephone rings.] Whoops.

[Recorder stops; restarts.]

[00:14:36.79]

Okay. I went all the way up to Colby College in Maine to see his work. He was having his show there that summer. And I decided when I opened my gallery that I was going to show him. I was absolutely positive that he was one of the most important American artists.

[00:14:52.33]

The funny thing is, when you start a business, you really think what you're doing. Twenty years later, I'm not so sure. But at that point, I was positive. Anyway, in picking up Fairfield Porter, I went up to speak to Tibor de Nagy. As a matter of fact, I just saw Tibor Saturday. Hadn't seen him in years. When I went to see him, they had the Welliver show on the wall. And I said to Tibor, "This show is just fantastic." And he said, "Well, if you like it, you can

have it." I couldn't believe it. And I bought one for myself. But immediately, I was so afraid that they would disappear.

[00:15:37.45]

It turned out, of course, Tibor never sold another one except the one he sold to me. The whole show came down. And we did a poster showing a nude standing in the water, which believe it or not, the post office confiscated. Incredible by today's standards. But twenty years ago, send a nude through the mail. I mean, believe me, it was not erotic. It was just a girl.

[00:16:06.82]

MARINA PACINI: It's the one, *Joanne*, where she's standing in the water?

[00:16:09.57]

ESTELLE GROSS: *Joanne*. Exactly.

[00:16:10.60]

MARINA PACINI: And the whole image showed on the flyer? Oh, it was a poster.

[00:16:15.49]

ESTELLE GROSS: It was closed. It was a poster, and it was folded with a seal.

[00:16:19.35]

MARINA PACINI: So it wasn't even that whoever was—

[00:16:21.36]

ESTELLE GROSS: Oh, no, no, no.

[00:16:22.38]

MARINA PACINI: You couldn't see it.

[00:16:23.22]

ESTELLE GROSS: Oh, no, not unless you opened it up. Anyway, that was a downer. Some got through. But a lot didn't. We didn't sell one. And it was a beautiful show. Victoria Donohoe at that time wrote it up as the show of the year, which it was. And that summer, as a matter of fact, I had to sell my Welliver because we ran out of money. The first year in an art gallery is very expensive. And anyway, I also showed Rackstraw Downes.

[00:16:58.18]

MARINA PACINI: Could you spell that?

[00:16:59.17]

ESTELLE GROSS: Rackstraw?

[00:16:59.89]

MARINA PACINI: Yeah.

[00:17:00.22]

ESTELLE GROSS: R-A-C-K-S-T-R-A-W. Downes is D-O-W-N-E-S. But Rackstraw I know is still showing. I showed Red Grooms, and his then wife, Mimi Gross. I showed Jane Freilicher. I mean, really it's funny when I look back at who I showed. And these were not well-known names at the time.

[00:17:27.27]

MARINA PACINI: How were you finding these artists?

[00:17:29.46]

ESTELLE GROSS: I went around to the galleries. Also, like every other—and I'm not a collector. But like anyone else interested in art, I read *Art in America*, and I read *Art News*. And I'd go to museum shows.

[00:17:44.96]

MARINA PACINI: So you were bringing New York galleries to—New York artists to Philadelphia.

[00:17:48.56]

ESTELLE GROSS: New York artists, yeah. I knew absolutely nothing about the Philadelphia art scene, but nothing, except for the group in Chestnut Hill that I painted with. I don't know what happened to them. It was just a group that got together. And we used to paint in someone's—I think it was their barn.

[00:18:05.06]

MARINA PACINI: So it wasn't any formal class of a school.

[00:18:07.65]

ESTELLE GROSS: Oh, no, no, no.

[00:18:08.39]

MARINA PACINI: Can you remember anyone?

[00:18:09.35]

ESTELLE GROSS: No, I don't remember anyone. But I do—no, I don't. I really don't remember. But I do remember Hobson's class because a lot of those people are still very much around.

[00:18:24.75]

MARINA PACINI: Okay. I'm going to come back to Hobson Pittman in a minute. So did you ever work directly with the galleries, for example, with Neil Welliver? Did you work, I mean, with the artists? Or were you working through the galleries?

[00:18:39.57]

ESTELLE GROSS: Oh no, I worked with the artists.

[00:18:41.25]

MARINA PACINI: Okay.

[00:18:41.58]

ESTELLE GROSS: I worked with Neil.

[00:18:42.78]

MARINA PACINI: Okay.

[00:18:44.37]

ESTELLE GROSS: I worked with Rackstraw. Well, Rackstraw at the time was teaching at Penn.

[00:18:49.19]

MARINA PACINI: Okay.

[00:18:55.22]

ESTELLE GROSS: Jane Freilicher, I worked through the gallery. Red Grooms and Mimi Gross, I think I also worked for the gallery with them.

[00:19:04.92]

MARINA PACINI: Okay. So you weren't establishing some sort of relationship, where you were their Philadelphia dealer.

[00:19:11.73]

ESTELLE GROSS: No, no.

[00:19:11.94]

MARINA PACINI: They would just come down and do this one show. It was done on a show-by-show basis.

[00:19:16.24]

ESTELLE GROSS: Well, I always tended to keep shows as long as I could afterwards. But yes, basically, I was not setting up a dealer-artist relationship that would go on. You're quite right. It's a shame I didn't. But I didn't know enough to do that.

[00:19:36.59]

MARINA PACINI: Okay. Have you done that now?

[00:19:39.77]

ESTELLE GROSS: Yes, for example, Benny Andrews, whom I showed in February, I expect to show Benny on a steady basis. And it's something that I now have experience and I talk to the artist about when I start the relationship. And I tell them, I'm not interested in a one-time show.

[00:20:00.24]

MARINA PACINI: Okay. What brought about that change in your philosophy?

[00:20:04.59]

ESTELLE GROSS: Because I saw that artist, one of the things that's so intriguing about them, is that they change and develop. Sometimes they change and don't develop. They regress. But people, of course, the ones that I started with for some reason all became—no, they didn't all become stars, though, because I can think of some names of some people I showed and were never heard from again. Ray Ciarrocchi still shows with Tibor. But he's never really gone anywhere. And I always liked art that had a lot of brushwork. That was always something that I would find intriguing. And it was always the kind of artist that I would take on.

[00:20:53.85]

MARINA PACINI: That was going to be one of my questions. Was there any sort of—I mean, I think you've just answered it. Did you set out to specifically work with realist or abstract art?

[00:21:06.47]

ESTELLE GROSS: I really didn't. When I went to college, obviously we were taught that Abstract Expressionism was the most important American movement in art that had ever been. And I mean, I know, as far as I'm concerned, we're still living at the end of the Abstract Expressionist era.

[00:21:27.65]

But I didn't set out to get—Abstract Expressionism was already history even 20 years ago in New York. And I was more interested in the New York school who followed the Abstract Expressionists, used all the things they had learned from Abstract Expressionism, and I

thought gone beyond it, and gone back to subject matter. The funny thing was one of them was Alex Katz. And I'd always admired his work, but for some reason never got around to showing him. He was a part of that group, though.

[00:21:59.54]

MARINA PACINI: Okay. Well, let's talk about the Philadelphia artists that you did show. At some point, you obviously shifted over and did start to show the work of Philadelphia artists. Is there some sort of watershed year when that happened? Or was it just something you drifted into?

[00:22:15.17]

ESTELLE GROSS: No, I didn't drift into it at all. In 1971, I realized that I couldn't keep on showing New York artists because there was no way to build up the reputation and to sustain it since I was doing this on a show-by-show basis. Whereas, I discovered that local artists had local followings. And I met the artists because they came to the gallery. And they would invite me out to see their work.

And I also realized that, my goodness, just because they lived in Philadelphia didn't mean that they didn't have talent. What it did mean was that they didn't have the reputation. And they were not asking the prices that New York artists were. So I decided that I would try showing some of the artists whom I liked. And again, it took a while by the time I met them, saw their work, set up a show. It was probably 1972 before I really showed Philadelphians.

[00:23:17.74]

MARINA PACINI: How did their work sell?

[00:23:20.64]

ESTELLE GROSS: Oh, it's sold very well compared to New York artists.

[00:23:23.55]

MARINA PACINI: Oh, really?

[00:23:24.36]

ESTELLE GROSS: Oh, yeah.

[00:23:26.04]

MARINA PACINI: Well, why was that happening? Is it because Philadelphians weren't interested in New York artists? Or they would just as soon go to New York and buy in New York?

[00:23:33.75]

ESTELLE GROSS: Oh, I don't think they—basically, I don't think most of them were buying anywhere. In other words, I don't think there was a big demand for art in Philadelphia. I mean, people who are written up and who say that they've been collecting for the last ten years, I don't see how you can have a collection of ten years. [Telephone rings.] Collecting is something you do over a lifetime.

[00:24:00.71]

So, no, the Philadelphians were very loyal to other Philadelphians. They would buy artists, say, if they had studied in a class for adults with someone like Pittman or someone like Jimmy Lueders. They would come in to see his work. And of course, the work was a lot less expensive than New York work. People would come in, take a look at Red Grooms' drawings. We never sold one Red Grooms drawing. Not one. And they were great. There's nothing you could do about it. We had not built up, we had not created an art scene here. And to just bring in people whose work started about $1,500 twenty years ago, it was not possible.

[00:24:51.67]

MARINA PACINI: And at that point, what was a comparable price for a Philadelphia artist?

[00:24:56.71]

ESTELLE GROSS: The median price was $300. That went up to about $600 in '72, '73 because more galleries began to open. But to get $600 was an achievement. That was a nice price for a painting. And that was a painting that wasn't small. Of course, it also wasn't rare because I was working with people who were producing all the time and had a lot of work because there hadn't been a gallery scene in which to show. So it all stacked up in their studios.

[00:25:35.24]

MARINA PACINI: Well, that's one of the big complaints that I hear over and over again is that there has not been either an active gallery scene or a lot of people buying the work of Philadelphia artists.

[00:25:47.99]

ESTELLE GROSS: That's not true.

[00:25:48.89]

MARINA PACINI: No?

[00:25:49.37]

ESTELLE GROSS: It's not true at all.

[00:25:50.75]

MARINA PACINI: Okay.

[00:25:51.11]

ESTELLE GROSS: I'm really very surprised. As a matter of fact, Hope Makler, who is a friend of mine, started out showing Philadelphia artists, dropped all of them en masse, and began to show nothing but New Yorker internationally famous artists. I went the opposite route, and maybe because I'm more middle-class than Hope is.

[00:26:13.88]

I know that no matter how much you can admire some of the big names in Violette De Mazia's collection that's going up for auction, most of us are not in a position to spend $100,000 or more on a work of art, no matter how much we love it or appreciate it. So I thought, well—and also, I've been brought up in the time that the Bauhaus was important.

[00:26:36.50]

There really is no reason that I can't—and this shows you the kind of confidence I had—that I can't select good quality artwork that people such as myself can afford to buy. Now, it's not for investment. Although, certainly some of the things that I showed turned out to be investment art. But basically, if you have to wait 20 years to get an investment back, it's not much of an investment. Truly. But Philadelphians have been very supportive of Philadelphians. I showed Sam Maitin. I mean, Sam had fantastic response.

[00:27:19.19]

MARINA PACINI: But at which point? Because when I was talking about was more earlier. It's not so much the recent—

[00:27:24.74]

ESTELLE GROSS: Sam showed as early as '72.

[00:27:27.05]

MARINA PACINI: Okay.

[00:27:27.65]

ESTELLE GROSS: I don't show Sam anymore at all. Hobson Pittman had fantastic support.

[00:27:37.39]

MARINA PACINI: But it seems like the Philadelphia gallery scene exploded in the late '60s, in about the '60s, and that up until that point, there really wasn't—

[00:27:48.22]

ESTELLE GROSS: Well, I remember I had my gallery up on the second floor. And as you know, that was kind of a new attitude. And I decided to stay up and six days a week because we're in a business section. And I patterned myself to a great extent after New York galleries because I was familiar with them.

[00:28:07.58]

But when Marian came—and she was Marian Locks, that is—was showing behind a gift shop called The Chestnut Tree. She asked me how it was on the second floor. And I said it really wasn't bad, because I was so proud of my space. And it was very important to me to do one-person shows, because I painted myself. And I knew that was how you really got to know what an artist was doing, not just showing them one or two good paintings that he won prizes for.

[00:28:39.37]

So Marian joined me on Walnut Street. I forget who else opened. So many people have opened. They may have exploded. But they exploded right out of here because—Hope was on Locust Street. Janet Fleischer was on 17th, and still is, of course. Hope's closed. I'm trying to remember who else was there. I really can't remember. I'd say more have disappeared than have stayed.

[00:29:09.36]

MARINA PACINI: Where's Mangel?

[00:29:11.36]

ESTELLE GROSS: Ben Mangel at that time?

[00:29:13.37]

MARINA PACINI: Yeah.

[00:29:14.18]

ESTELLE GROSS: He was out in Bala Cynwyd.

[00:29:15.87]

MARINA PACINI: Okay, so he wasn't here. Okay. Yeah, because that's pretty much the list of the galleries that I've got that were started in that period and continue to operate today.

[00:29:26.64]

ESTELLE GROSS: And continue. Oh, sure, because all the rest closed.

[00:29:32.58]

MARINA PACINI: Okay. Well, let's see. Let's talk about some of these artists. How about Larry Day?

[00:29:45.45]

ESTELLE GROSS: I was introduced to Larry Day by Gladys Myers. And she had the Gallery 1015. I really admired her stable. And she was one of the people to whom I went when I became interested in showing Philadelphia artists. She was at a very unhappy period in her

life, which I wasn't aware of because I didn't know her well. And it was she really—she handled Sam Maitin. She handled Jimmy Lueders. And she handled Larry Day.

[00:30:16.68]

Larry Day really haunted me. And one night I was sitting up in the gallery alone, and I decided to call him. At the time, I was very shy. I've gotten over that. And I asked him if he would show with me. And I had seen his work at Dick Langman's. And Larry's always been the most upright person. And he said as soon as he was through with his commitment to Dick Langman, he'd be delighted. And he's been showing with me ever since. And his show opens Friday night.

[00:30:52.29]

MARINA PACINI: Okay. He was showing with Gladys Myers, did you say?

[00:30:59.64]

ESTELLE GROSS: Right. He was showing with Gladys Myers at the 1015 Gallery in Wyncote. And from there, when Gladys closed—although she still had his work in her home because I saw it there, he moved over to Richard Langman in Jenkintown. And Richard has since closed.

[00:31:16.35]

MARINA PACINI: Okay. Arthur B. Carles. You gave me an Arthur B. Carles file. I mean, I know he was obviously deceased.

[00:31:30.72]

ESTELLE GROSS: Arthur Carles I knew from several sources. Perry Ottenberg was, and still is, a friend of my husband's. And he showed me his Carles collection, which was fairly extensive. I knew Carles from shows at the Academy [Philadelphia Academy of Fine Arts – Ed.], from the Philadelphia Museum of Art, and from Jane Piper, who'd been a student of his. And it was available. And he was a Philadelphian. I never had any major works by Carles and never really went anywhere with his shows. He didn't sign his work. And he was very careless about the condition. It was very difficult—and of course, he was already gone by the time I started showing. It was very difficult to really build up a market for him. And I never did.

[00:32:32.72]

MARINA PACINI: Okay. How did you get the work that you did sell? Did you find collectors who were interested in selling pieces?

[00:32:41.02]

ESTELLE GROSS: Never. I have never worked that way.

[00:32:43.35]

MARINA PACINI: Okay.

[00:32:43.54]

ESTELLE GROSS: Because collectors have always bought retail. And when they go to sell it, they want to realize a profit. And that's not possible. I mean, they'd have to live an awfully long time, because they're not in business. And if they make a little bit, they're lucky. I always feel I have had the pleasure of living with the work. And if they get their money back, they should be grateful. It's not possible really to sell from private collections. At least, I haven't found it possible. I either work directly with the artist, or in the case of Carles, I did work with someone who had a collection. But it was another professional in the art field.

[00:33:35.24]

MARINA PACINI: Can you talk about that relationship? Or is that—

[00:33:38.83]

ESTELLE GROSS: Well, I really don't know too much about it. It was someone I think who used to do Carles' framing. And nobody was particularly interested in the work that was left. Like most artists, Carles left a tremendous amount of work behind. And this man simply collected it, and then decided to sell some of it. He didn't sell all of it.

[00:34:03.75]

MARINA PACINI: Did he contact you? Or did you find him?

[00:34:06.07]

ESTELLE GROSS: He contacted me when he heard I was interested in Carles.

[00:34:10.18]

MARINA PACINI: Okay, so word had gotten out that you were looking into doing that.

[00:34:14.05]

ESTELLE GROSS: You get things from very funny sources. I mean, Harry Lunn in Washington D.C. contacted me about someone because the artist was in the Barnes Collection. It was a very successful show.

[Recorder stops; restarts.]

[00:34:33.02]

MARINA PACINI: And you were going—so how did the show sell? The Carles show.

[00:34:40.40]

ESTELLE GROSS: It sold very well. That was not a problem. The problem was I wasn't always comfortable about the provenance, because they for the most part were unsigned. And I had to go by my eye. And my eye is no different than anybody else's, even though all I do all day long is look at art. And I and I have to depend on my eye. It becomes a moot point. You get someone else who claims to be an expert. And they say, well, I don't think that's so. I have this experience. And it turned out I was right, and the other person was wrong. But it was a dealer who'd had 35 years' experience in the business. And I was very surprised.

[00:35:23.63]

MARINA PACINI: Okay. So the show sold well. And that was it. You figured—

[00:35:26.87]

ESTELLE GROSS: That was it.

[00:35:27.14]

MARINA PACINI: —you weren't going to go on—

[00:35:28.43]

ESTELLE GROSS: I really couldn't. It's just it's just too chancy. And the one thing I won't do, I won't lie. And I won't pretend that something is an investment. And I certainly won't tell somebody that it's an Arthur B. Carles if I'm convinced that it's not.

[00:35:45.97]

MARINA PACINI: I just realized that I neglected to ask you when we talked about Larry Day, how—I'm assuming that he has also sold well over the years?

[00:35:55.36]

ESTELLE GROSS: Larry has sold well. But you have to remember that with Larry, Larry was not that prolific. He probably is more prolific now, because he's no longer teaching, so he

paints full time. But it was not as if Larry would bring in a couple of dozen small paintings. Larry always painted on a large scale. But Larry always had a following, too. Larry is definitely caviar, and may not be everybody's dish. But for those people who want it, in my opinion, Larry is the best artist in Philadelphia. And if any artist lasts, it's going to be Larry Day.

[00:36:32.74]

MARINA PACINI: How often would you have shows for him here, every other year or was—

[00:36:36.43]

ESTELLE GROSS: Every other year.

[00:36:37.33]

MARINA PACINI: He produced enough that you could—

[00:36:39.55]

ESTELLE GROSS: Well, I could do a show with Larry's large paintings with eight to ten paintings. And if he did not have enough paintings, we would add drawings to the show.

[00:36:50.28]

MARINA PACINI: Okay. Is there anything else you want to say about Larry Day before we move on?

[00:36:58.61]

ESTELLE GROSS: Larry is the nicest person to work with. He really is. He's a wonderful person.

[00:37:07.34]

MARINA PACINI: I also got files from you on Edith Emerson and Violet Oakley.

[00:37:14.25]

ESTELLE GROSS: Edith Emerson lived near me, and I used to walk my dog down St. George's Road and see the sign that said, "Violet Oakley Memorial." And well, Violet is such a funny name. And I finally—and of course, I belong to the Woodmere Art Museum. I lived near there. And finally, I made the connection that Edith Emerson was the person who at that point was the director of the Woodmere Art Museum.

[00:37:44.12]

And I stopped in one day. And that's how we started our relationship. At that point, she'd already retired from Woodmere, and she was an old lady. And the Violet Oakley Memorial was sort of fading fast. I don't know how long it had been since Violet Oakley had died. And Edith was very hard up. And the Violet Oakley Memorial was in a big barn, literally a barn, and the heating bills were horrendous. So she asked me if I could sell some of Violet Oakley's things. And she didn't have a lot. And I told her I'd like to try, and I liked her work. And I began to carry them both.

[00:38:39.79]

And by the way, there was not a great deal of enthusiasm for either one of them. And that I will say. And speaking to Dorothy Gillespie—Dorothy and I were speaking about women in the art field. There was—I don't know if it's still true. But there was certainly less respect paid to women artists than to men artists. In other words, I think, after all, Violet Oakley did do the murals in Harrisburg. I think had she been a man, she would have had a far larger, more encompassing reputation. That name, of course, I think absolutely demeans her.

[00:39:19.47]

Edith Emerson, because she was Violet Oakley's protege, had an even lesser reputation. But

now I get people—it got to a point, of course, my husband and I walked down to see Edith one night. And she was really very sick. She died shortly thereafter. And she asked me if I would buy a few things because, really, she had bills to pay. And I think I bought two drawings.

[00:39:49.21]

It's really embarrassing to talk about it. And now, people will come up to my apartment. I get all sorts of offers to buy them. But you know, I'm not interested in selling them. And I feel that when I had a commercial show, that was the time to buy them. You can't buy things off my wall. [Laughs.] But yeah, I mean, I think people really missed the boat with Violet Oakley and Edith Emerson because there was plenty of work.

[00:40:15.70]

And when Edith died—and she told me she was going to do this—and we returned every scrap of paper to her. She told me that she was going to be leaving it to three different institutions, which she did. And Hobson did the same thing. And I think they were right. But there is no Edith Emerson or Violet Oakley on the market, except that which comes up for resale from a private owner.

[00:40:38.86]

MARINA PACINI: Where did the stuff get left?

[00:40:42.34]

ESTELLE GROSS: Violet Oakley left some to the Brandywine Museum, because she basically—I think she studied with Howard Pyle and felt that she was part of that Brandywine group. Some got left to Drexel, again, because I think Howard Pyle was associated with Drexel. And some got left to the Pennsylvania Academy because she was the second woman to win the Academy Gold Medal. I think those are the three institutions.

[00:41:08.39]

MARINA PACINI: Okay. So when you had those shows, those works did not sell well?

[00:41:16.31]

ESTELLE GROSS: No, they did not sell well at all.

[00:41:18.41]

MARINA PACINI: How many times did you show them?

[00:41:21.08]

ESTELLE GROSS: I think I showed Violet and Edith two, three times, either individually or together. I don't remember. I know that I bought some things just to support the show. And I used to pick Miss Emerson up in my car and bring her down. I mean, she really could barely walk.

[00:41:42.65]

MARINA PACINI: Okay. Is there anything else you want to say about either one of those ladies?

[00:41:48.17]

ESTELLE GROSS: It's just a shame that they weren't appreciated. [Telephone rings.] It's a shame they weren't appreciated in their own time. Also, I don't know if this business—I sound as if I feel sorry for myself, and I don't because I feel we've done very well. But I don't know that my suggesting to someone that they buy Edith Emerson or Violet Oakley had less impact because I was a woman trying to sell a woman artist.

[00:42:22.02]

I don't know if, say, these works had come from an important art dealer in New York or Paris, and if they had been beautifully framed and presented in elegant surroundings, if they might not have sold immediately. That kind of lack of respect for women and for local artists combined, in addition to a lack of respect for a local art dealer, it is one of the things that keeps the art market depressed here in Philadelphia.

[00:43:01.28]

MARINA PACINI: Well, I was just thinking about that as you started to talk about that. Many of the galleries with the longest history in Philadelphia have been run by women.

[00:43:11.48]

ESTELLE GROSS: Yeah. Well, women are willing to take less than men in any field, I think. They're willing to settle for being an anesthesiologist, even though they may have a gift for surgery, because people will tell them that they're not going to make good surgeons, or they can't have a family if they're going to be a surgeon, that kind of thing. So women will settle for a little less. And I think women who like the art field will say, well, they can't make a lot of money. But—

[00:43:45.03]

MARINA PACINI: I'm going to stop now because this tape—

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[00:00:02.15]

ESTELLE GROSS: [In progress] I would be without a reputation, and reputations are built by dealers, and museums, and the media. So I don't know if Edith Emerson and Violet will ever have a big market, because their work has basically been taken off the market. And they never had a big enough reputation so that if a piece came up, people would go crazy.

[00:00:29.49]

MARINA PACINI: Huh. So in some respects, it sounds like you're saying the fact that they left it to these institutions that they hurt themselves.

[00:00:36.15]

ESTELLE GROSS: Well, they didn't—they're gone. And what they did was say they were not interested in—nor did either of them have children, so there was no reason for them to worry about leaving an estate. And they, I'm sure, felt that the thing most valuable that they could leave was their work, and they did.

[00:01:01.05]

MARINA PACINI: Well, let's shift gears a little bit and talk about Humbert Howard. How did you come about to work with him?

[00:01:08.50]

ESTELLE GROSS: Humbert. How in the world did I get Humbert? Oh, and I got—I do remember. Over everybody telling me that he was not good and wouldn't sell. That was the craziest thing. I don't even remember who told me that. Nobody ever sold the way Humbert did. He sold—I mean, the first opening we had, we sold 19 works at the opening. How many paintings that is? I mean, we couldn't write fast enough.

[00:01:44.00]

MARINA PACINI: Who was buying?

[00:01:45.35]

ESTELLE GROSS: Philadelphians. He had his following.

[00:01:47.36]

MARINA PACINI: But it was—was it whites or Blacks? Or was he—

[00:01:49.61]

ESTELLE GROSS: Whites. Oh, there were no Black people buying at that time. It was all white people. Oh, Humbert has never been a Black artist in that sense. Humbert studied at the Academy.

[00:02:01.29]

MARINA PACINI: So you have no idea why he sold—or was it just that people—

[00:02:05.25]

ESTELLE GROSS: Oh, sure.

[00:02:05.52]

MARINA PACINI: —wrote that his painting is—

[00:02:07.23]

ESTELLE GROSS: I mean, first of all, Humbert was a very talented painter. He was well-trained, and he was a very winning person. And he was his own best salesman. So was Hobson Pittman, for that matter. Hobson could really sell a painting. And he'd get very cross if you even questioned the price. But Humbert was a perfect gentleman. And he was nice to everybody. But he'd come right out and say, I'd like you to own a piece of my work. And people were very flattered. And he sold. And so he was probably—not probably—he was, for years, my best-selling artist.

[00:02:45.75]

MARINA PACINI: So the fact that he was involved with the Pyramid Club didn't help generate any sales down here?

[00:02:54.15]

ESTELLE GROSS: No. It was only—no. I mean, it's only been in recent years that there's been any sort of Black middle class. And even Black middle class, like white middle class, are not exactly your art-collecting group.

[00:03:05.62]

MARINA PACINI: Yeah.

[00:03:08.62]

ESTELLE GROSS: Every now and then, yes, there would be a well-to-do Black person who would buy a Humbert Howard, but it certainly was not his market. Not at all.

[00:03:16.87]

MARINA PACINI: Okay. How many years did you exhibit his work? Can you remember roughly?

[00:03:23.20]

ESTELLE GROSS: I think I had eleven shows for Humbert. So I would say I represented him for twelve or thirteen years. He would show every year.

[00:03:31.63]

MARINA PACINI: Had he been showing before you opened, before he started with you?

[00:03:36.43]

ESTELLE GROSS: He was showing somewhere. I'm trying to think. Because someone told me that he wouldn't sell and didn't sell. That's what was so funny. So he must have been

showing somewhere. But you know, there was no real art scene. So it was so fluid that I don't know if we were showing in an informal way or—I don't know where this person got that idea, but it was absolutely not true.

[00:04:03.34]

As a matter of fact, if Humbert and I had just had a personal difference—and I think we had really been together too long, and it was time for Humbert to move on. And it was really time for me to move on. I'd become so dependent on Humbert. I'd do a show for Humbert, sell the usual third of the works. And Humbert was very fussy. And he was very prolific. And it was just—time just went up. You can't stay together forever with an artist.

[00:04:34.35]

MARINA PACINI: He was working—didn't he work at the—was it the post office, that he supported himself?

[00:04:39.96]

ESTELLE GROSS: Sure, he worked at the post office. As a matter of fact, when he came—when he first started working for me, he had just started getting a pension from the post office. He must have been maybe 50 at the time. And he'd probably put in his 25 years.

[00:04:56.16]

MARINA PACINI: So he was retired?

[00:04:57.66]

ESTELLE GROSS: He was, basically. But it was so funny. He would come in to do—we would be doing a mailing. And we'd say,"Does anybody know where 3411 Hamilton Street is?" And Humbert would say, "19104." He knew all the zip codes. It was wonderful.

[00:05:13.17]

MARINA PACINI: Huh. Did you show any of his earlier work? Did he have things from when he was working at the post office? Or were you dealing strictly with new things?

[00:05:21.83]

ESTELLE GROSS: Dealing strictly with new things. As I said, Humbert was so prolific. And I bought one of his older things myself. As a matter of fact, I gave it to my sister for a gift. His older work was very academic. But everybody loved Humbert's work. The color, people would just—

[00:05:45.28]

MARINA PACINI: It was wonderful.

[00:05:45.89]

ESTELLE GROSS: Yeah, it was loose. And it was emotional. And parts were funny. Actually, I see a relationship between Benny Andrews and Humbert. Humbert would also do collage. And we had some funny experiences with Humbert, I mean, after we got along. We were together a long time.

[00:06:12.42]

MARINA PACINI: How about Jimmy Lueders?

[00:06:14.34]

ESTELLE GROSS: Jim I definitely picked up I think through Gladys Myers. That, I'm not sure. Jimmy also was teaching at Woodmere and lived in Germantown. And he was very popular. We were very successful with his first show. Not quite as successful with his second show.

[00:06:40.74]

And after his third show, Jimmy left. I really don't think that Jim somehow—I don't know, Jimmy fell between the cracks. I don't know why. He was very friendly with Liz Osborne. And Liz was showing with Marian, and so Jimmy moved over there. But I can't say that he's ever made a tremendous splash there, whereas Liz went on to New York and became, I think, a fairly big name. And Jim just never did. I don't know why.

[00:07:17.47]

MARINA PACINI: Jane Piper.

[00:07:19.69]

ESTELLE GROSS: Jane, again, I got through—I got her name through Perry Ottenberg. It took me a while to get to her because I had seen her work, and I didn't know her name. And I tried finding her in the phone book. I couldn't find her. I finally asked Perry. And he said, well, her name really is Baltzell.

[00:07:38.58]

So then I started to show Jane. We were enormously successful with Jane. And we showed her—again, I think too long, too many years. It got to the point—because Jane didn't change enough and grow enough, so that I began to confuse paintings. And when I do that, there's something wrong, because that shouldn't happen.

[00:08:02.99]

But I spoke to Benny Andrews about this. It was very embarrassing. And he told me that he feels that artists should not stay with a dealer after ten years. He said, you should move on and find—and other galleries have other clientele, which is true. They handle sales in different ways, different person. And this is a personal business. So Jane moved on. And I imagine she's doing fine.

[00:08:30.26]

MARINA PACINI: And did she sell well while you had her?

[00:08:32.16]

ESTELLE GROSS: Oh, she sold extremely well. Extremely well. But we discovered something very funny. When we started, we would depend on the artist to bring the client. Now we find that the artist can depend on us to bring the client. So when an artist leaves us, it really doesn't make much difference. Every year, we've made more money, and artists come and artists go. But whatever we're doing—I'm not sure what it is. It is the gallery now that is creating the market, not the artists.

[00:09:10.11]

MARINA PACINI: Well, if she—you said that she sold well. How do you think she differs from, say, Violet Oakley and Edith Emerson? Do you think it was just in those intervening years?

[00:09:22.44]

ESTELLE GROSS: Jane, at that time, was teaching. She had a very active following, the same as Hobson Pittman. It just so happened that she also had a following that were affluent. Now, Hobson would go out of his way to make friends and cultivate this kind of person. Jane did not do that. But nevertheless, I mean, some were her friends, and they were very supportive of her.

[00:09:52.44]

Now that we've moved again into a different kind of strata, and that we do so much corporate work, I would not be able to sell Jane, I'm sure, as successfully as I did then. Just as I can no longer—and I do not any longer sell prints, for the most part. And yet, at one time, wow, we sold more prints than anything else. And we sold so many. And we sold at such prices that we couldn't get the price today that we got 15 years ago, because it was a market. It was there.

[00:10:27.37]

MARINA PACINI: So then you don't necessarily feel that there's been any sort of change that makes the climate more hospitable for women artists?

[00:10:34.29]

ESTELLE GROSS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:10:36.75]

MARINA PACINI: Hmm.

[00:10:42.17]

ESTELLE GROSS: Well, I think there's probably—there's probably less active prejudice against showing a woman. I mean, it would never occur to me not to show someone because it was a woman. On the other hand, there are far too many women painting today, so that it's difficult—[Telephone rings.] Let me think about that, Marina, okay?

[Recorder stops, restarts.]

[00:11:11.71]

I had a conversation with Dorothy Gillespie just three weeks ago. And she was very active in the women's inter-art movement. And this was—she's in her 70s, also—trying to get women more accepted into the art field, and in New York, get them to a point where they could ask for and receive the same kind of prices that men artists do. That's not true in Philadelphia. We don't have that kind of thing. I think Jane Piper or Edna Andrade would get the same price as, say, Larry Day.

[00:11:48.24]

But Dorothy told me something I thought was interesting. She said when she got this wonderful show going for some well-known artists—it was Elaine de Kooning and Louise Nevelson, and interspersed with them, some people who were rank amateurs, some people who were beginners, some people who were just starting their reputation.

[00:12:08.37]

And she said those people who were willing to work, and anxious to show, and knew how to get along, did fine. And those people who sat around and were negative about everything and complained about the fact that women weren't being given a fair shake, and this kind of thing, didn't. She said they spent much too much time being negative instead of going out and creating a market for themselves. I think she's right. But Philadelphia, I really don't think that there's a prejudice against women artists, not in the galleries, anyway.

[00:12:46.15]

MARINA PACINI: In terms of getting a gallery to represent you?

[00:12:49.12]

ESTELLE GROSS: Not at all.

[00:12:50.01]

MARINA PACINI: Okay.

[00:12:50.53]

ESTELLE GROSS: You know, women are sometimes too negative about themselves. I mean, they come in and they say to you, "Well, you wouldn't want to handle this, would you?" It's very easy to say, "No, as a matter of fact, I wouldn't." [They laugh.] They practically set it up for you. And it's always easier to be negative than to be positive, because once you make a positive response, you want to do something about.

[00:13:14.25]

MARINA PACINI: Well, let's talk about Hobson Pittman, and how about starting with where you met him?

[00:13:21.87]

ESTELLE GROSS: That was very funny. I met Hobson—first of all, I had a friend. Not being a Philadelphian, I became friendly with someone whose mother-in-law painted in Hobson's class. And I was looking for a class to get back to, so I registered in his class. Now, I had no idea what his class consisted of.

[00:13:39.57]

MARINA PACINI: Had you seen any of his work before you went?

[00:13:42.36]

ESTELLE GROSS: I had seen his work, but it never occurred to me, either, that it would have anything to do with the way he taught. And, by the way, it didn't. He was a wonderful, wonderful teacher. He was more gifted as a teacher, I think, than as an artist. And the day I came in, I was very shy. You know how you feel about being new in a class? And he made this big announcement about his newel post. Has anybody found me a newel post? I asked this class last year. And I promise whoever gets a newel post, I'm going to give one of my pastels. Well. It was very exciting.

[00:14:23.69]

My husband at the time was doing redevelopment work. I went and I went out to the phone and I asked to call Jay, and I asked him if you have a newel post. And he said, "Oh, yeah, we're just taking apart an old house now, and we have two of them, as a matter of fact." I said, "Well, bring them home."

[00:14:40.84]

When I got back in the class, I told Hobson—he was very excited. I don't think he quite believed me. I told him I had two newel posts. So the next week, I drove up with the newel posts, and he loved them. And he said, what happened to the rest of the staircase? I didn't know. I ran to the telephone and called Jay. And he said, "Oh, my God, we've just started to burn it." I said, "Well, stop burning it, Hobson wants it." So he brought it home, and we leaned it against the roof of the house. And you can imagine this whole stair, these spindles. Hobson loved it. And he gave me not one, but two, pastels. And we became very good friends. And that's when—he used to come over and he would look at my painting.

[00:15:30.04]

And he wouldn't say it was good or it was bad. He would just say, "Estelle, I'll bet everything in your house is purple," and he'd leave. And I'd look at my painting and see everything in my painting really was purple. And like most amateurs, all my shadows were purple. But he wouldn't say anything derogatory.

[00:15:49.01]

And once a semester, he would have crits, once or twice. And we would have to bring in work that we had done at home without his supervision, without anyone's supervision. It was amazing. Things that were done in his class were great. Things that we would bring in from home were not. So I know—and I don't care whether the layman believes it or not, but I know that being an artist is a combination of what's in your head, and certainly what's in your hands, but it's also something emotional. And if it isn't there, it just doesn't work.

[00:16:30.98]

And Hobson absolutely used to inspire his classes. And they used to turn out beautiful things. We used to buy things from each other. But send us out on our own, and we couldn't do it. And that's why I will very rarely handle anyone who has just gotten out of art school. I want to see what they can do on their own. And the few times that I've tried to handle someone—and I know other dealers who do go right to the Academy and get this kid the day he graduates. Doesn't work. I have never had anybody who went up from there. Usually, they just quit.

[00:17:12.83]

MARINA PACINI: Where was his school? Was it—

[00:17:15.08]

ESTELLE GROSS: Hobson?

[00:17:15.50]

MARINA PACINI: Yeah.

[00:17:15.89]

ESTELLE GROSS: He taught at the museum. He did museum classes.

[00:17:19.49]

MARINA PACINI: Okay. How many times a week did you go?

[00:17:20.90]

ESTELLE GROSS: Just once.

[00:17:21.81]

MARINA PACINI: Okay.

[00:17:22.67]

ESTELLE GROSS: It was very—by the way, it was very hard to get into Hobson's class.

[00:17:26.02]

MARINA PACINI: Huh.

[00:17:26.69]

ESTELLE GROSS: I didn't realize it at the moment. I didn't realize the kind of class he had. I think he had one class in the afternoon. I would do the morning class. I was working at the time, so I would take off that morning during the week so that I could paint with Hobson. And when he got cross—I'll never forget when he said to a woman, "Leave this room." And this is a grown woman. And I think she was sure he wasn't speaking to her. And he said, "I said, leave this room." And one woman came in one day and told him that her therapist had told him—or told her that she should paint for whatever reason. And he said, "You don't paint in my class for therapy."

[00:18:15.46]

He was also the one that taught me that you don't arrange flowers the way florists do. He would take a bunch of flowers and jam them into a vase and take his hands away. And don't ask me. That was Hobson. They were wonderful. He would take a piece of paper, rip it around, and then look at this piece of paper and put it down, move it around a little and say, "that's it." And it would look like an Arp [Jean Arp –Ed.]. I mean, he was an artist, he truly was. I always felt that Hobson basically was a pastel artist. And I never liked his oils as much as his pastels. And he would say to me, "Well, my pastels are minor song." But as a teacher, there was no one like him.

[00:19:07.13]

MARINA PACINI: Did you do still life in class? Did you work from the model?

[00:19:10.65]

ESTELLE GROSS: Both.

[00:19:11.13]

MARINA PACINI: Both.

[00:19:11.58]

ESTELLE GROSS: Yeah. Of course, like most people, I always preferred the still life.

[Recorder stops; restarts.]

[00:19:34.66]

MARINA PACINI: Who was in the class with you?

[00:19:36.58]

ESTELLE GROSS: Well, I know, for example, Anita Harris, who is now showing at Ben Mangel. And I believe that the [Philadelphia –Ed.] Art Museum owns a piece of her work. Mildred Margolies, whose work I really was not too familiar with, but I saw it recently in a show at the Jefferson Bank. There was a girl named Marjorie—I believe her first name was Marjorie—Wolfe. Oh, Elaine Wolfe, that was it. And I know that she had at least two shows. You have to understand, by the way, that most of Hobson's pupils were women.

[00:20:23.54]

MARINA PACINI: I'm assuming that that's because they were offered during the day, and—

[00:20:26.69]

ESTELLE GROSS: That's exactly right. It was at a time that women were really not going back to work in droves the way they are now. I know Rhoda Richards painted with him for a while. And then when Hobson wanted to take some time off one year, I know Warren Rohrer took over his class. I don't—and Dan Miller, who is now at the Academy. I guess he's teaching there. He taught some of Hobson's classes. I'm sorry, I don't really remember all the names. I thought I would remember more than I do. Not being a Philadelphian, I really didn't see those people nor know them outside of the class.

[00:21:13.99]

MARINA PACINI: Did the classes have exhibitions anywhere?

[00:21:17.83]

ESTELLE GROSS: Never. No.

[00:21:19.90]

MARINA PACINI: So he didn't do something—

[00:21:21.49]

ESTELLE GROSS: You know, Woodmere is doing a show—it opens April 22—of Pittman's students. I'll probably go up to see it because I—it's funny the kind of hold he had on people. He was very, very supportive of young artists, but extremely so. Rodger LaPelle had a show at Temple University, and Hobson announced to the class I was in that we had to go see the show, that this was a most promising young artist. Because Roger had become a dealer. And Hobson was very generous about doing things like that. I wish I remembered more, but it was a long time ago.

[00:22:12.53]

MARINA PACINI: Okay, so you'd already talked about the fact that—how it came about that you did the show. It was just the one show, though, that you did?

[00:22:22.06]

ESTELLE GROSS: Yes, it was just that show. Hobson really was not well after that. And I would go out to see him. But he never got it together for another show.

[00:22:34.90]

MARINA PACINI: Did he die soon afterwards?

[00:22:37.09]

ESTELLE GROSS: I'm trying to remember how old he was when he died. I don't think he was more than 75 or 76. And he really just wasn't well.

[00:22:44.27]

MARINA PACINI: Here we go. I've got the date here. He died in 1972, so it wouldn't have been much beyond that.

[00:22:50.47]

ESTELLE GROSS: Yeah, and he really wasn't well.

[00:22:52.69]

MARINA PACINI: Okay.

[00:22:53.95]

ESTELLE GROSS: Isn't that sad, though?

[00:22:55.87]

MARINA PACINI: But he did come down to the opening.

[00:22:58.87]

ESTELLE GROSS: Oh, he was very healthy then.

[00:23:00.64]

MARINA PACINI: Okay.

[00:23:00.97]

ESTELLE GROSS: Oh, sure. I don't know what he died of. But I remember Evan Turner was head of the art museum. And Hobson had just called me to tell me how unhappy he was. And then suddenly, he said, "Oh, Evan Turner has just come, I'll talk to you later, Estelle." Here he's trying to coax me into coming out to keep him company, but he got a better offer. He was funny like that.

[00:23:23.27]

MARINA PACINI: Did his show sell well?

[00:23:25.37]

ESTELLE GROSS: Oh, sure.

[00:23:26.15]

MARINA PACINI: Everything sold out?

[00:23:27.65]

ESTELLE GROSS: It didn't sell out, but it sold well.

[00:23:30.11]

MARINA PACINI: Close. Okay.

[00:23:30.80]

ESTELLE GROSS: Yeah. Believe me, if there had been enough left, I would have bought it.

[00:23:35.30]

MARINA PACINI: Hmm.

[00:23:36.93]

ESTELLE GROSS: And he sold for a lot of money at that time.

[00:23:41.32]

MARINA PACINI: Was there anybody else that you were selling who sold at a comparable level?

[00:23:46.36]

ESTELLE GROSS: No, because I really wasn't showing any other Philadelphians who were at —I don't know if there was anybody you could even say it was at a comparable level of Hobson.

[00:23:55.48]

MARINA PACINI: OK. Well, how about Carroll Tyson?

[00:23:59.83]

ESTELLE GROSS: Carroll Tyson, I never knew. Carroll Tyson, I got through Hirschl & Adler, I believe. And I got him basically because I wanted someone associated with Philadelphia. I had wanted to move into 19th and early 20th century art. And, of course, I thought I would start with someone with roots in Philadelphia. And Carroll Tyson was an obvious choice. I had also shown Harold Russell Butler, who was from New Jersey. And Howard—boy, am I drawing a blank on this one. And I was supposed to see his daughter in New York too.

[00:24:51.18]

Yeah, I don't know. However, I got his show. And it was a good show. But I want to tell you that people, contemporaries, will forgive a dead artist things that they won't forgive in a painter who's currently showing. Carroll Tyson was certainly not a major painter. And I did not, by any means, feel it was our best show, even though he was represented by one of the best galleries in New York. His work was competent. He was a competent amateur. But as far as I'm concerned, that's about all I would say. And I did not show him again.

[00:25:35.62]

MARINA PACINI: Did that show sell well?

[00:25:38.59]

ESTELLE GROSS: Not really well, because the people who were interested in his work did not want to pay the—I'm putting quotes around this—"New York prices." And those people who had bought his work before were aware that they could go to Hirschl & Adler and have a far greater choice. A lot of people asked me about his portfolio of birds, but that had long been —long since been sold out.

[00:26:06.47]

MARINA PACINI: Hmm. Roswell Weidner.

[00:26:13.70]

ESTELLE GROSS: Now, Ros was one Philadelphia artist I must say who did not sell well. Ros has been teaching at the academy I guess for over 35, maybe 40 years. And I think that's a mistake. And Ros is a curmudgeon. He's very difficult to get along with. And I showed him— he changed the whole gallery, repainted the color of the door, brought in a rug that he wanted in the center. I mean, after all, it was my gallery. And insisted on building the kind of leaf thing that you have in wallpaper stores, and he wanted to show his drawings that way.

[00:26:54.76]

And he did not sell well at all. His prices were far too high for Philadelphia. But his attitude

was that because he was, even at that time, a grand old man of the Academy that he should get grand old man's prices. And he would not sell at the same price as some of his successful students. And I guess someone like Jimmy Lueders may have studied with Ros at one time. But the fact that someone's your student does not mean that he can't be more talented, or more popular, or more desirable than you. And it didn't work for Ros. And I tried to arrange another show for him. And he came in with what I consider wild prices—

[Recorder stops; restarts.]

[00:27:46.68]

Anyway, Ros, it's a shame, as Sharon [Ewing –Ed.] would corroborate this—well, there was no way to make Ros see that if we couldn't do a show that sells, then we can't do a show, because this is a commercial gallery. I don't tell people what to paint. But on the other hand, they can't tell me how much I have to sell to pay the rent. I know how much I have to sell. And I know what things cost. And I know how much my payroll runs a week. And I can't arbitrarily say, "Oh, but this is so beautiful, that I'm going to ask $30,000 for it," which was one of the prices Ros came up with. And so that show fell apart.

[00:28:31.87]

I must have done a group show because I know that I had definitely saved a slot for Ros. I think Ros's personality is the biggest hindrance he has. Because there's no reason that Ros's work shouldn't sell. I showed it to people. I would bring people down to his studio. They were so excited about his work. I even sent the names of these people up to Ros so that he could follow through. I sold one of his things and didn't take a commission at all because it was such a good collection. Working with someone like that is a thankless job, and I can't do it. I'd be out of business.

[00:29:06.82]

MARINA PACINI: So you only did the one show?

[00:29:08.39]

ESTELLE GROSS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:29:08.91]

MARINA PACINI: And when was that? Was that in the '70s?

[00:29:11.34]

ESTELLE GROSS: Yeah.

[00:29:13.11]

MARINA PACINI: Hmm. Do you happen to know off the top of your head if he's gone on and somebody else has managed to—

[00:29:20.27]

ESTELLE GROSS: Oh, sure. He shows at Newman.

[00:29:21.77]

MARINA PACINI: Okay.

[00:29:22.76]

ESTELLE GROSS: I don't know how his show sells there, but I doubt it sells well.

[00:29:26.30]

MARINA PACINI: Okay. Well, the last one from the files that I took from you was Harold Weston.

[00:29:33.75]

ESTELLE GROSS: That's the name I was trying to think of, Harold Weston. That's whose daughter I was to see in New York. Unfortunately, my husband got sick, and we ended up at Duke University. And I have not gotten back to her. Harold Weston's wife came to me. I had seen his show at the Art Alliance. And I contacted her. She came in and she was very nice. And she said she was going to move to a retirement village, and she was very interested in showing his work. However, I mean, you can imagine her condition if she was going to move into a retirement village. So basically, we showed very small works.

[00:30:19.05]

On the other hand, people—studio painters such as Harold Weston did not work large. And paintings like this were large works for that era. And we did well with Weston's work, that's why I wanted to show him again. He related very strongly to Marsden Hartley and Arthur Dove. More Marsden Hartley, though. And that's not really a popular look. If he had built—but he belonged with that group. And if he had built up a reputation in New York, I have a feeling that he would be just as esteemed as Marsden Hartley.

[00:30:59.36]

MARINA PACINI: Hmm. So his wife is the one who approached you?

[00:31:02.76]

ESTELLE GROSS: Yeah, and she's still alive.

[00:31:04.21]

MARINA PACINI: Okay. And you just did the one show?

[00:31:07.08]

ESTELLE GROSS: Just did the one show because she went into retirement.

[00:31:09.84]

MARINA PACINI: Okay.

[00:31:13.51]

ESTELLE GROSS: You know, these people lose track. They don't realize that this is an ongoing business, to keep on bringing in new work all the time so that I can keep the market going.

[00:31:23.95]

MARINA PACINI: Yeah.

[00:31:24.42]

ESTELLE GROSS: It's a business.

[00:31:27.24]

MARINA PACINI: Are there any other artists that we haven't discussed so far that you would like to discuss at this point?

[00:31:34.14]

ESTELLE GROSS: You mean Philadelphia artists who I think are important?

[00:31:38.45]

MARINA PACINI: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:31:38.81]

ESTELLE GROSS: I don't know if some of these people are—do you remember D'Orazio? He used to teach at Penn?

[00:31:46.71]

MARINA PACINI: How's that spelled?

[00:31:47.51]

ESTELLE GROSS: D-O-R—D'Oraz—O-Z-I-A [*sic*].

[00:31:51.93]

MARINA PACINI: Okay.

[00:31:52.44]

ESTELLE GROSS: I thought he was important. There was—oh, what's his name? He shows with Larry Becker. He's a sculptor. Italo Scanga. Italo Scanga, to me, is an important Philadelphia artist who never made it here.

[00:32:15.33]

MARINA PACINI: Did you ever handle his work?

[00:32:16.83]

ESTELLE GROSS: No, and I wrote to him. But he's friendly with Larry Becker and he was going to show with him. Let me think about this. I'm trying to think of, is anybody—

[00:32:29.39]

MARINA PACINI: Is there anybody else you wanted to show and for some reason it never happened?

[00:32:41.63]

ESTELLE GROSS: Not really. I'm trying to think. Not really. Most artists are easy to get along with, and they're delighted to have a show. Some of them don't want to be tied down for a long time. But basically, if you're successful with their work, they're happy to stay with you, even on an informal basis. No, I don't think—Harry Bertoia—but then I showed Harry. I would have liked to have shown him more, but Harry wanted me to buy the work outright because he'd gotten sick. He died of cancer of the larynx. I just saw his wife and his son Saturday night at the Allentown Art Museum. And it really is too bad.

[00:33:19.99]

But again, when I said that Ros Weidner was his own worst enemy because he has that kind of irritating personality—"abrasive" is the word. Because Harry was sick—and I guess I should have realized. He had cancer of the larynx, I guess due to working in that beryllium copper. He had beryllium poisoning. And he wanted to get his estate together. So he was not willing to send things out on consignment any longer, or I would have done another show for him. And now I'm sorry that I didn't.

[00:33:55.79]

But I felt very funny about it. I knew he was dying. And to invest in a dying person saying, "Well, as soon as he is dead, wow, I'm going to have the estate," that's sort of distasteful. So I didn't do it. But, you know, so what? That was one person, though, and I—sorry. I also am sorry that I did not get more involved with the New Hope School. We have a little house out there. But I was busy doing what I was doing. And they looked so old hat to me. Now I have more of a historical perspective and are more interested in them. But now, they're unavailable to me.

[00:34:40.25]

MARINA PACINI: So you have worked predominantly with—

[00:34:42.95]

ESTELLE GROSS: Contemporary.

[00:34:43.89]

MARINA PACINI: Okay. Once you started moving into Philadelphia, did you still occasionally show a New York artist or did you—

[00:34:51.84]

ESTELLE GROSS: I still do.

[00:34:52.53]

MARINA PACINI: Okay.

[00:34:52.95]

ESTELLE GROSS: I still do. But what I did was I showed people like Benny Andrews, who, to me, is a very famous artist. Now, I don't know if he'll ever be as famous as Fairfield Porter, but Fairfield Porter died shortly after. He was not a young man. And then, of course, he had a show at the Whitney.

[00:35:14.30]

But I don't know if Benny will ever be as famous as Neil, because he's a Black artist and it may take time. However, I feel that he's a very important artist. I think he's as important as Jake Lawrence or Romare Bearden as far as Black American artists go, and I have told people that. But here again, I feel as a woman Philadelphia dealer, I cannot convince Philadelphians that he's important, but he is.

[00:35:48.43]

Robert Goodnough, whose work I'm handling right now. I don't know if I can afford to give Robert a show because his prices are high. I have been following his career since 1969. And I've not worked up the courage to give him a show. Dorothy Gillespie shows with me. She's a New York artist. Matter of fact, there are so many of them. I don't really divide them into New York, Philadelphia. I don't always remember. The problem always is with the New York artists that their prices are higher. And a gallery is a competitive situation.

[00:36:32.43]

So what happens is I will show a landscape artist, say, from New York next to a landscape artist from Philadelphia. The Philadelphia artist is just as talented, just as competent. The painting is just as interesting. And the price is far less, so I'll sell the Philadelphia artist. Because unless someone's looking for the name, or is educated, or in the art field, I mean, it doesn't matter to them whether it's Robert Goodnough or Larry Day. What's the difference to them if they like the image?

[00:37:06.65]

MARINA PACINI: Hmm, okay.

[00:37:10.34]

ESTELLE GROSS: And that's about it.

[00:37:12.23]

MARINA PACINI: Well, let's talk about the Philadelphia gallery scene. We've touched on it bits and pieces as we've talked so far. What was it like when you first opened up?

[00:37:24.77]

ESTELLE GROSS: There really wasn't a Philadelphia gallery scene at all. I mean, that sort of covers it. Janet [Fleischer –Ed.] had what she calls the Little Gallery—she and a doctor's wife. I mean, they basically sold knick-knacks. I think the very fact that Marian felt it was appropriate to open along—in a hallway of a gift shop shows you where the scene was.

[00:37:49.61]

And the rest of the people really had art shops where they did a little framing and sold—every now and then, they'd hang some local artist who might be a friend of theirs. And then there were some dilettantes with some money like S. Beryl Lush with very little knowledge and absolutely no—when I say "taste," I don't mean in a fashion sense. And they would try to start a salon type gallery. And again, it didn't work. Because running an art gallery is running a business. And if you forget that, you're out of business.

[00:38:27.51]

So I feel that when I climbed upstairs and went to the second floor and said space is the most important thing that you can have—and it's impossible at the price level we sell at and the market in which we sell, to have first floor space. Because a commercial establishment allocates a certain worth to each square foot. In other words, that square foot has to produce $3,000 a month.

[00:38:59.67]

Well, we have square footage galore with absolutely nothing on it. The only thing that's occupied are the walls. Can't do that on the first floor. It just doesn't make sense, not unless you're on Madison Avenue. And so I went up on the second floor. And I think when Marian joined me on Walnut Street, and then suddenly there was Janet, and then—I forget who was next. But I know Noel Butcher came. And suddenly, we had a little scene going here.

[00:39:32.16]

But it always was a little scene—Marina, to be absolutely honest, I know when I started the Philadelphia Art Dealers Association we started with six galleries. We got it up to ten at one point. Including galleries in the suburbs, we're up to fourteen members. We've been organized now for ten years. We opened in—I started in 1979. We have never really gotten beyond that ten to fourteen, that's sort of our breaking point. And then our gallery will close and we lose them. So whatever art scene there is in Philadelphia, it's a very unstable scene. When you have as few as six, or seven, or even ten galleries that have managed to stay in business for ten years, that doesn't say much for the stability of the scene.

[00:40:25.89]

MARINA PACINI: Is it the same crowd that supports all of the galleries? Or do you each have your own?

[00:40:31.47]

ESTELLE GROSS: No, it's—well, I really don't—I really don't know. I think I have people who collect some of my artists. Marian has people who collect some of her artists. But basically, Philadelphia doesn't have a large transient trade. I think even Washington D.C. certainly has a large transient trade. New York gets a million and a half transients a day coming in. So we basically are depending on a market that exists here in Philadelphia. I know we do. We sell to South Jersey. We sell some people in Harrisburg and Allentown. But basically, it's a Philadelphia market.

[00:41:16.94]

MARINA PACINI: Okay. Can you make any sort of generalizations about Philadelphia collectors and the type of art that they collect? Or is that absurd?

[00:41:29.27]

ESTELLE GROSS: No, it's not absurd. But what I would ask you is if you would give me a definition of what you mean by a collector, then I would answer it. Because I always get caught in this—

[00:41:40.29]

MARINA PACINI: Okay, well, let's—then let's start off by—let's backtrack and talk about who you consider the serious, big collectors in Philadelphia.

[00:41:54.14]

ESTELLE GROSS: Well, let me put it this way. I mean, sort of avoid that question by saying that recently—I think it was the *Arts & Antiques* magazine listed the 100 most important art collections across the United States. There was not one in Philadelphia. Not one. And Philadelphia is, what, still the fourth largest city in the United States.

[00:42:18.96]

MARINA PACINI: What was the—is there some sort of criteria—was it in terms of the size of the collection, or strictly on the basis of quality?

[00:42:28.15]

ESTELLE GROSS: Oh, I'm sure—

[00:42:29.77]

MARINA PACINI: And the reason—

[00:42:30.34]

ESTELLE GROSS: It has to be both. Because if you—for example, there's a young lawyer here in town who probably has more Larry Days than anybody else, and important Larry Day paintings. But he's not an important collector, because that's all he has. So he has five very important Larry Day paintings. And if anybody did a retrospective for Larry, they would have to come to him. But he's not an important collector in the sense that [Eli –Ed.] Broad is in California.

[00:42:59.62]

MARINA PACINI: When I think of Philadelphia collectors, I want to—there's always Henry McIlhenny. Now, granted, his collection is now at the art museum. Think of the Potamkins, who are not collecting contemporary for the most part.

[00:43:14.07]

ESTELLE GROSS: Well, the Potamkins collection, the important part, it was put together years ago, 30 years ago.

[00:43:21.00]

MARINA PACINI: Yeah. So they're not still actively—

[00:43:24.66]

ESTELLE GROSS: I don't think so, as far as I know.

[00:43:27.51]

MARINA PACINI: Okay. So I see—and now I begin to understand what you're talking about how hard it gets to start talking about—

[00:43:33.65]

ESTELLE GROSS: About collectors. For example, Joe Shine, who has the Seward Johnson outside his office—now, he has a lot of artwork. If it depends on number, he's a collector. If it depends on quality, he is not. And this is not putting him down. He prefers to buy what he likes. Now even Dr. Barnes, who was certainly opinionated enough, did depend on Glackens, at least at first, for his advice and guidance. That's important. If I want to know who's good, I ask artists, "Hey, who's good?" That's how I found out about Howard Hodgkin. If I had the money, I would buy Howard Hodgkin. I wouldn't dare show him in the gallery. He wouldn't sell one, I know it.

[00:44:29.96]

MARINA PACINI: We're about to run out of tape. I'm going to stop.

[END OF TRACK AAA_gross89_4185_m]

[00:00:03.58]

MARINA PACINI: This is Marina Pacini interviewing Estelle Gross on—for the Archives of American Art, April 5, 1989, at the Gross McCleaf Gallery. This is tape 2.

[00:00:19.69]

ESTELLE GROSS: Are you going to give me a definition of what you consider a collector? Well, actually, a collector really has to have both quality and quantity. And there is no one in Philadelphia—or there is no one now in Philadelphia who is collecting and has built up a collection important enough to be ranked as important. I have heard that David Pincus—I've never seen his collection. I understand that's in a state of flux.

[00:00:56.13]

I've seen Vivian Potamkin's collection, but that was formed years ago. I've seen Billy and Acey Wolgin's collection. Again, that was formed years ago. Jack and Muriel Wolgin's collection—they live near me. Some wonderful things, but it's over. I mean, these people are no longer young. They're not really active collectors.

[00:01:17.74]

MARINA PACINI: Then who's out there buying in Philadelphia? Or just people who are buying —

[00:01:21.91]

ESTELLE GROSS: Corporations.

[00:01:22.85]

MARINA PACINI: Oh, okay.

[00:01:23.89]

ESTELLE GROSS: That's who's buying. And some of them are buying some wonderful things with a lot of vitality. And they're not just buying names. They're buying sometimes for their image, sometimes because they need something on the walls. But usually they buy with an overall plan. And I think my husband's bank, Bell Savings Bank, has built up a collection of maybe a hundred Philadelphia artists. Now, of course, they bought them from me. But it's fun to walk in there and say, "Oh my God, will you look at that Joe Sweeney?" His show opened in New York Saturday.

[00:02:08.51]

ARA has a good collection. And all these collections are very eclectic, though, because someone will start it who has an interest, and then that person leaves, or they decide to redo the office, or they move to another floor and it gets scattered. Fidelity Bank—their collection is all over the place. And the collection loses cohesiveness. The same thing happened with Smith Kline. They started out with one idea and then got lost somehow because they kept switching art consultants. So I really can't say that there's anybody in Philadelphia, outside of Cigna. And their big collection is really firefighting apparatus.

[00:02:49.11]

MARINA PACINI: Then the people who are coming—the individuals, versus the corporations who are coming and buying from you—is there any generalization—or that would be buying from other Philadelphia galleries—is there any generation you can make—generalization you can make about them if we drop the word "collector"?

[00:03:08.97]

ESTELLE GROSS: Okay. They are usually buying Philadelphia artists to give their support to the city in which they are making money, I guess. I mean, they're in business here. And they should support the community. Something should come back. So they're supporting the artist, in addition to which they have to like pictures, paintings of the Philadelphia scene. I know that when Fidelity Bank had an office in London, they asked us—one of their

executives from London came over and bought a painting of a Philadelphia scene to hang in the London office. So they buy an awful lot of Philadelphiana. So they're very supportive.

[00:03:55.87]

They buy Philadelphia scenes. They support Philadelphia artists. You can't ask for more than that. Most of them come in—they have a budget. They're not like individual buyers. They don't fall in love with something and just have to own it. I just fell in love with a piece of sculpture that I'm trying to talk myself out of buying.

[00:04:16.95]

MARINA PACINI: Have you seen any sort of a change from when you opened, and today in the—

[00:04:22.26]

ESTELLE GROSS: Oh, yeah. I said to you one of the reasons there was no Philadelphia scene was nobody was particularly interested in buying painting. Why would they? Walk into someone's office. They'd have photographs of the kids up on the wall or maybe him pulling up the sail on a sailboat. But now—my goodness. To be with it, you just have to have original art. And people get very insecure because they know they don't know. So they come to us and hope that we will help them buy something that won't embarrass them when their friends walk in and say, "What's that?" And they say, "What's that?" "That's a Joe Sweeney. I just bought it at Gross McCleaf." And we're very aware of that. So I'll sometimes—

[00:05:09.25]

I saw some people this morning out in Villanova and they wanted me to wait until their decorator came. And I told this couple that I don't sell wall decor. I sell art. And it really doesn't matter to me what the decorator is putting in the room. I came out to measure the space. That was it. It doesn't—what do I care whether they have oriental rugs or not? Good art—and it doesn't matter if it's blue or green, either. Good art's going to look wonderful no matter where you put it. Wouldn't you put Picasso's Blue Period in a red room? What difference does it make?

[00:05:52.47]

And it's easier to work with an art consultant who is buying for a corporation because ten times out of ten, and it's usually a "she," has had an art background or is in the process of updating her art background. So she knows what you're talking about. She knows what quality is, and you're not trying to make someone fall in love with this painting. Can you imagine if every time you bought a painting you had to fall in love? You'd have to live a long time, have a lot of love affairs.

[00:06:28.25]

MARINA PACINI: There used to be, in the '30s and '40s, real complaints about the lack of coverage of the art scene, of the exhibitions and things. Has this been a problem? Do you perceive this as a problem since you've been in business, that the papers have a serious commitment to the Philadelphia art scene and that they ensure that it's covered properly?

[00:06:57.12]

ESTELLE GROSS: There was more coverage when I—there was more coverage when I started than there is now. But we basically only have one paper, discounting the *Daily News*. We only have one paper. That's the *Inquirer*. And since there isn't a big enough art scene to advertise and—do you want me to stop and [inaudible]? Okay.

[00:07:25.22]

I think the art critics—anyone who's ever written art criticism has been very, very kind to us. Just recently, we showed an artist that I think Victoria [Donohoe –Ed.] let me know she did not, and she did not cover the show. Now, that was very kind of her. She could have torn the show apart, but she didn't. And I think she takes the positive attitude that if she's going to give someone space, she might as well give it to someone she considers worthwhile. Why bother to use that space to tell you what a dreadful show Gross McCleaf is having?

[00:08:00.83]

Now, we have had a few reviews that were not complimentary, but very, very few. I think that the big problem here is simply that there isn't enough media in Philadelphia based around the arts. But there isn't a big enough art scene to support it. People have tried to start little art magazines. What are they going to write about, the ten galleries that exist? There are 550 galleries in Manhattan.

[00:08:31.10]

MARINA PACINI: Was that part of Philadelphia's problem?

[00:08:33.57]

ESTELLE GROSS: Of course.

[00:08:34.63]

MARINA PACINI: The standard, cliché question.

[00:08:36.93]

ESTELLE GROSS: But of course it's the problem. Ten galleries can't support an art magazine or even an art newspaper.

[00:08:44.94]

MARINA PACINI: Are there many people who in Philadelphia are going and buying in New York?

[00:08:49.89]

ESTELLE GROSS: I don't think so. I don't think so. If you go to New York, the basic price for a beginning artist, a neophyte, is $1,500. And believe me, that neophyte is going to—it's a long, long shot that he's going to go anywhere, and if you can buy him for $1,500. The kind of person who would go to New York to buy is already an educated collector. Now, I'm not saying there are no collectors in Philadelphia. What I'm saying is there's nobody in Philadelphia who is buying at a big enough level so that there is a collection to talk about. If you have bought ten prime works—and prime works—I'm talking things today that are $50,000 to $100,000 apiece. If that's not a collection, ten pieces—

[00:09:45.36]

MARINA PACINI: But there are plenty of people in Philadelphia with enough money to be buying, aren't there?

[00:09:50.67]

ESTELLE GROSS: Are there? I don't know. I honestly don't know. I don't know how many of the Fortune 400 live in Philadelphia. I know that in Houston, Dallas, New York, and Los Angeles, Santa Fe—yeah, they're all over the place. But in Philadelphia, I'm not so sure how many there are. I don't know.

[00:10:18.56]

MARINA PACINI: All right.

[00:10:21.96]

ESTELLE GROSS: It's a moot point because if they're not here, obviously they can't buy.

[00:10:25.51]

MARINA PACINI: Or is it that they've got the money and they're just not spending it?

[00:10:30.83]

ESTELLE GROSS: I don't know. You know, Digby Baltzell may be right, that you don't have to

flaunt it in Philadelphia. I remember going to Bonnie Wintersteen—I remember going to Mrs. Morris's, where around—Mrs. Morris had an indoor pool. There was Picasso next to Matisse. And I remember Bonnie Wintersteen's Matisse at the end of her dining room, the—it was called "Girl in Blue Dress," I think. And those things are so outrageously expensive today. Granted, they cost a lot when they bought them, but they were not that expensive. Somebody, yes, who was comfortably off and interested in art could buy them. That's not so today. Even museums can't afford to buy today. So there's something strange happening, and it's very discouraging, I think.

[00:11:28.33]

MARINA PACINI: Actually that's a question I should have asked you. Does the art museum come and buy?

[00:11:36.00]

ESTELLE GROSS: Never. But you know, that's a misconception also. Very few museums buy. They're usually gifted, or donated, or lent. Outside of the Getty, museums never have enough money to buy. And our museum certainly doesn't.

[00:12:00.32]

MARINA PACINI: One thing I was wondering is if they would even be interested. Because what you're—what do you think the museum's commitment is to Philadelphia artists?

[00:12:10.75]

ESTELLE GROSS: It's not their objective. To chastise them for that is like chastising me for not selling ties. It's not my business.

[00:12:26.24]

MARINA PACINI: Okay. Well, the one final question that I have for you is, can you tell—you mentioned Gladys Myers and Gallery 1015. She seems to have been one of the few of the generation from before. Can you talk a little—do you know anything about her gallery?

[00:12:43.33]

ESTELLE GROSS: About Gladys? Sure. As a matter of fact, I wrote a chapter in the Montgomery County book that was put out for their 100th anniversary. So I went over to interview Gladys, who didn't live too far from me at the time. She may still live there. She lives in Germantown. And we talked about the gallery she started in her own home. And she took all the furniture out of her downstairs. This woman was really committed.

[00:13:07.96]

And she would have black tie openings. And she sold, but she was not a businessperson. And she, I think, was beginning to have problems with a bit of drinking, and a bit of taking drugs, and a bit of philandering. And she and her husband split up, and I think that's why her gallery went out of business, but in addition to it, she was not a businessperson. So I think she was supporting the art scene out of her own pocket. But she had a wonderful eye and a wonderful gallery. Anybody who was interested in the arts found their way to Gladys.

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MARINA PACINI: Did she sell well?

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ESTELLE GROSS: No, because Gladys also was a little bit wifty, and she—if sells, she sells. If she didn't, she didn't. If she loved the artist, that was more important.

[00:14:04.31]

MARINA PACINI: Well, is there anything that you would like to say to sum up this interview? Any other thoughts that you might have?

[00:14:14.59]

ESTELLE GROSS: Well, it's a pleasure to me to go into people's homes today and see that they've bought art. I don't care what kind. What I care about is the fact that they think it's important enough, and they're proud of what they bought. I went into some place the other day and I couldn't imagine why it looked so unattractive to me. I realized on the way home it's because there were no paintings on the wall at all. And it was a very expensive place, and I don't remember where it was. But now, oh, it's wonderful that people are interested enough to buy because art is still not cheap. And that's nice. And people are interested now.

[00:15:07.20]

One of the things I don't like to do is I will tell my husband, "Please do not tell people that I'm in the art business," because the next thing I know, I'm trapped somewhere with people wanting me to give them an instant appraisal on this painting that they just brought back from Haiti or that they just bought the greatest Polish artist. This just happened to me Friday. I don't know anything about the art in Poland. And why would you go to Poland anyway?

[00:15:32.10]

America is the art center of the world. Don't people realize that? This is the age of American art. Just as it used to be School of Paris, right now—and it was School of New York. Right now, it's all over the United States. If you want to get funky art, you go to Chicago. If you like Diebenkorn, if you ever go to San Francisco, you can go out of your mind in their museum. If you like cowboy art, you can go down to Texas. And some of it's wonderful.

[00:16:06.20]

So anybody that calls me on the phone to tell me that they just bought Polish art, I say, well, so much for that. It's a Polish joke, as far as I'm concerned. And I'm not waving a flag and saying, "Buy America." It just so happens that that's where it's at today. People in Germany, people in Japan, they're buying American. Only some foolish American would go over and buy Polish. Of course, that is being chauvinistic because I'm aware that there is Anselm Kiefer, and Kooky [ph], and Baselitz. But for every one of those, there are ten Americans who are every bit as interesting. If anything, there are too many of them. That's all I have to say.

[00:16:51.37]

MARINA PACINI: Okay. Thanks.

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