



Smithsonian  
*Archives of American Art*

Oral history interview with Nell Blaine,  
1967 June 15

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# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Nell Blair Walden Blaine on June 15, 1967. The interview took place in New York City, and was conducted by Dorothy Gees Seckler for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

The original transcript was edited. In 2023 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

[00:00:10.35]

DOROTHY SECKLER: This is Dorothy Seckler interviewing Nell Blaine in New York on June 15, 1967.

[00:00:18.30]

[Recorder stops, restarts.]

[00:00:19.08]

DOROTHY SECKLER: That would have—

[00:00:31.44]

[Recorder stops, restarts.]

[00:00:31.62]

DOROTHY SECKLER: This is Dorothy Seckler—

[00:00:38.52]

[Recorder stops, restarts.]

[00:00:39.02]

DOROTHY SECKLER: I noticed that you were born in Richmond, Virginia, and I wondered if there's anything that you recall about your early life that would have any bearing on your training and what you became as an artist. I imagine that your family and these early years usually play some part. Did you have a large family?

[00:01:04.88]

NELL BLAINE: No, I was the only child, and my family was not very sympathetic to the idea of my being a painter.

[00:01:12.50]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, that always gives [inaudible]. [Cross talk.]

[00:01:13.58]

NELL BLAINE: That gives you an impetus. [They laugh.] But actually I wouldn't say that they stopped me because—I mean my mother encouraged me to a certain extent, because I think she was secretly proud, although she was very much against it. My mother was somewhat of a religious fanatic, and had dreams of my being a Baptist missionary in Africa. [They laugh.] So, I would reassure her later by saying that, "Well, I'm really a missionary, Mother. It's just a change of field." So, my father died when I was 16, but at an early age I wanted to be a painter.

[00:01:53.60]

DOROTHY SECKLER: How soon did you know it?

[00:01:55.35]

NELL BLAINE: Well, I was so young that I—I would say, "I want to be an artist," when I was about five, and now, of course, I didn't know what it was, but that must have been in my mind making paper dolls or something.

[00:02:06.07]

DOROTHY SECKLER: What had you seen that meant "artist" to you?

[00:02:10.04]

NELL BLAINE: Well, my mother had little penny prints. I believe they came from Boston, Perry Prints. I remember the first thing that I saw—they were mostly in sepia, and there were just a few inches in size. And I used to make a collection of those. But mostly art was cutting out furniture, and sewing things and—

[00:02:30.72]

DOROTHY SECKLER: —making things.

[00:02:31.47]

NELL BLAINE: —making things, sewing—

[00:02:34.49]

[Recorder stops, restarts.]

[00:02:34.67]

NELL BLAINE: Well, I was very sickly, unfortunately. I was—I lost a couple of years in school. My mother was an old schoolteacher and tutored me, and I sort of learned to amuse myself privately. So I'd write poems, and do a lot of things in bed. And actually, they were just childhood diseases. It doesn't mean I was an invalid or anything, you know. But one thing after another seemed to hit me and keep me out of school, so I was, at an early age, pretty much on my own, and—

[00:03:05.45]

DOROTHY SECKLER: In school, were you the one that always made the poster for the clubs—

[00:03:08.19]

NELL BLAINE: Yes, it got to be that way, and I say in the grammar school I would be one of about six that would do that. And then I got very competitive, and I was probably terribly ambitious. And I decided I was going to nose them out. [Laughs.] And I must have been sort of nasty. And then once I didn't get a prize—I think it was an honorable mention—in grammar school, and my mother came in and told the teacher that mine was better. [They laugh.] So I must have been very popular. But by junior high I realized that this competitive spirit was strong, and I realized that the people that I had known in grammar school—I was getting better. That is, I could do a likeness, and by high school, as a freshman in high school, I was doing portraits of the kids. And in art school, I didn't have a good art teacher. She was interested in me doing textile designs, and what I would do is sit and do portraits of people. And I used to earn 50 cents a head.

[00:04:07.98]

DOROTHY SECKLER: You did? And what medium were you working with mostly?

[00:04:10.19]

NELL BLAINE: Mostly pencil, very meticulous kind of pencil. It was sort of academic, nothing like anything I've seen. It was sort of an odd combination of edges, very carefully, almost like

relief things. I sort of devised this method. But I had the capacity to make a great likeness. Everybody recognized themselves. At least that's my memory of it. I don't have too many left of those.

[00:04:33.57]

DOROTHY SECKLER: I hope you at least had one or two for the Archives. [Laughs.]

[00:04:36.30]

NELL BLAINE: I had some funny things for them. [They laugh.] Then I used to send things to the local paper. They had a children's page, and so there my competition continued. And I would get these book prizes for them. So I think publicity had a great—was a great spirit at that time. But—

[00:04:57.08]

DOROTHY SECKLER: So, so far, it's all drawing. You hadn't gotten involved with color at all. You were—

[00:05:01.52]

NELL BLAINE: Well, I did watercolors. I did some watercolors, but mostly drawing. I did lots of pen and ink. I was working with very fine crosshatching—

[00:05:11.00]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:05:11.33]

NELL BLAINE: —and by the time I was in high school, I was working on a magazine and doing stipple. But with the finest crow quill, I would do a thousand dots.

[00:05:20.75]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Oh, I know. I used to do them too.

[00:05:22.02]

NELL BLAINE: It would take weeks. Did you do that?

[00:05:24.05]

DOROTHY SECKLER: [Laughs.] Yeah.

[00:05:26.45]

NELL BLAINE: As I look back, it seems very masochistic to make all these dots you know, like on the head of a pin.

[00:05:31.11]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, there must have been something in the air that made us do that, because I was also our editor of the high school's magazine, and I did these pages covered completely with either—with patterns of cross-hatching or stippling, or elaborate patterning involving things that looked like Oriental patterns, and so on. Was it something like Aubrey Beardsley that we saw at that time? What had you seen?

[00:05:58.67]

NELL BLAINE: I had seen that, but I don't think I was very sophisticated. So that would have been over my head, the exotic aspect. I was—I had seen things like Guptill, and these terrible illustrations, and I had—

[00:06:12.26]

DOROTHY SECKLER: What [inaudible] is Guptill?

[00:06:13.64]

NELL BLAINE: Well, as I recall, I had spent a few pennies and gotten—subscribed to a correspondence course. And it was a kind of illustrated—

[00:06:20.87]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Oh, yes. Oh, I know. You said Arthur Guptill? Oh, sure. [Cross talk.]

[00:06:23.20]

NELL BLAINE: Yeah, one of the—I think he was the editor, but it was more or less a commercial bent of using renderings, and pen lines and so on.

[00:06:32.87]

DOROTHY SECKLER: And they did encourage that, didn't they? The crossing—you were cheap—

[00:06:36.41]

NELL BLAINE: —All these little techniques with pen and—

[00:06:38.18]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes. And they were cheap to reproduce, so if you want to do anything for newspapers and magazines, that was another reason why you used these—

[00:06:45.02]

NELL BLAINE: Yeah. So, I didn't have a clear concept of fine art and commercial art, and so when I enrolled in college I actually took both, and was more creative in the commercial end I think, because I was somewhat inhibited in the painting. I was very nervous about the regionalist things. I didn't quite take to them, that kind of painting.

[00:07:10.43]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Who did you admire at the time?

[00:07:13.40]

NELL BLAINE: Well, at the time, my teacher was very much interested in Rouault, but I didn't quite get it. And the first exhibition I saw that really excited me was the show of—the Chrysler Exhibit at the Virginia Museum. And in that were very fine Leger drawings. I remember them. I didn't really quite understand them, but I was very stimulated by them. They were both meticulous and inventive, and it was a very sort of modern thing I had seen.

[00:07:42.81]

NELL BLAINE: Mm-hmm.

[00:07:43.23]

DOROTHY SECKLER: And also, there was an exhibition of Hélión's work. And I again, I didn't understand it, but I, you know, was very stimulated.

[00:07:51.96]

DOROTHY SECKLER: What year would that have been?

[00:07:53.94]

NELL BLAINE: That was about 1938 or '37. And then the class that I had joined—our school had an Art Students League that they called—it was a club, and named after the Art Students League of New York. I think most of the teachers had come from there, or studied there, and there was still like alma mater. So this little club made a three-day trip to New York, and that was the most exciting moment of my life to that point. And I saw Helena Rubinstein's exhibition, in which I saw my first Mondrian. And again I didn't understand it,

but something stayed in my mind, particularly the Mondrians, Picasso, and these Héliens. So—and then I saw an exhibition at the Virginia Museum of a painter who was different from any of the local painters, and that was—her name was Worden Day.

[00:08:47.94]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Oh, I know Worden Day.

[00:08:48.75]

NELL BLAINE: Well, at that time it was Esther Worden Day, and she was on a grant. She had Rosenwald. And she was teaching in my school. Meanwhile, my father had died, and I had to leave school. There wasn't enough money to continue, so I took a job in commercial art, making something like \$20 a week and working for an agency. And at that point, when I saw her show, I decided to enroll in an evening class, and her show was influenced very much by a combination of de Chirico and Picasso. But this was not an orientation that I had seen in any of the local painters, which was a kind of local scene in mostly ramshackle buildings or a little satire about our South.

[00:09:34.95]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Did you get to know Worden Day at the time?

[00:09:36.78]

NELL BLAINE: So, I studied under her.

[00:09:38.28]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Oh.

[00:09:38.37]

NELL BLAINE: I enrolled in her class, and then we became friends. And she encouraged me to leave home, so much to the unhappiness of my mother, who thought it was a shocking—

[00:09:49.80]

DOROTHY SECKLER: You were 20 by this time.

[00:09:50.88]

NELL BLAINE: No, I was 17.

[00:09:52.56]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Oh, well, you were pretty young then.

[00:09:53.73]

NELL BLAINE: I was 17. Then I left when I was 18, and came—and she told me about Hofmann, the first one. I never heard of Hofmann. And she had studied with Vytlačil, who had been a student of Hofmann's, I guess, in Germany. So she knew of it secondhand, really. And she kept saying how difficult and how mysterious, how mystical Hofmann was, and I was fascinated. And she said, "I'll go with you to New York, and you can—you know, your mother will be so alarmed, as you're going at this age."

[00:10:28.86]

But my mother put up a terrible fight. Oh, she was just so upset, and she threatened to have me committed. And she called up the officials. This is really not for any—you know, for the public, really, but she called up museum officials, and the head of the art school and said, my daughter is going for immoral purposes. And she tried every way desperately to stop me because she was very lonely and possessive, but I was determined to go. And at that point, Worden got another grant and determined to stay in the South, so I came along with—I found someone else to come along. [They laugh.] I had to study with Hofmann at that point. So I immediately went to Hofmann's when I arrived. I was excited about New York, and I also

found a studio on 21st Street right the first week. And that was—

[00:11:24.29]

DOROTHY SECKLER: What year would that have been?

[00:11:25.85]

NELL BLAINE: That was 1942.

[00:11:27.53]

DOROTHY SECKLER: '42, yeah. Uh-huh [affirmative]. So you were around 20 by the time you got here—

[00:11:30.80]

NELL BLAINE: Yeah.

[00:11:31.37]

DOROTHY SECKLER: —really, and got enrolled in the Hofmann class and so on. That's a good age to get into the battle. And how did you feel when you—you know, your first experiences in the Hofmann class and, you know, all the strain—

[00:11:46.22]

NELL BLAINE: Well, I was a pure disciple. I was absolutely cut out to be a disciple at that point. I was so excited, because it was totally unlike anything I had known before, and I really opened it all up. The talk with the two-dimensional and three-dimensional was something we had never gotten.

[00:12:04.40]

And also, I simultaneously enrolled at the Art Students League with Barnett.

[00:12:11.15]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Oh, yes.

[00:12:11.57]

NELL BLAINE: But I was so excited by Hofmann that I just dropped out immediately, and I just gave myself to that. And I made friends there which I kept all my life, that I met right that first week. Albert Kresch, who was a painter, I met there, and I met Lee [Leland -Ed.] Bell, although he didn't study there, technically. He never studied anywhere. He would wander around. [They laugh.] He was always on the periphery. And I introduced him to his wife. She was a student there, Louisa Matthíasdóttir, and he saw her through the doorway and insisted that I make a party to introduce them. [They laugh.] And after about a two-year courtship, he finally persuaded her to marry him. And then I also met with Ward Bennett there, and a number of people who I've kept up with—

[00:13:06.51]

DOROTHY SECKLER: What were the—

[00:13:07.08]

NELL BLAINE: —through the years. But Albert Kresch is a painter that later joined the Jane Street Gallery. And of course, Lee Bell and Louisa did. And so those two are really lifelong friends—

[00:13:18.46]

DOROTHY SECKLER: What was the work like at that time? What was the work of your group in Hofmann's—?

[00:13:23.40]

NELL BLAINE: Well, Al Kresch's work soon became flat geometric direction, sort of a combination of Mondrian and Arp, if you can imagine it, and somewhat different from mine. He used a different kind of palette. I was more interested in the pure colors, and he used very sultry, strange colors, also some stark ones. But at the time, we were really good Hofmann students. We used the approach with the triangles, and—

[00:13:53.07]

DOROTHY SECKLER: You worked from the bottle.

[00:13:54.00]

NELL BLAINE: We worked from the bottle entirely, but I felt even then as a student that he was really digging in in a way that few of them were. And—

[00:14:03.89]

DOROTHY SECKLER: But you feel that you understood what he said?

[00:14:06.99]

NELL BLAINE: Yes. Well, I really felt I was one of the chosen. [They laugh.] I was a rather conceited young thing at that time. And in fact, I took it on myself—I hope no one was offended—to interpret some of the others. Some of the older ladies, you know, that you didn't feel quite as—they were a little mystified by his language.

[00:14:34.05]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, in this first month of working with Hofmann, you mentioned, of course, the concept of both the two-dimensional and three-dimensional, and so on. That must have been quite a complex concept to get across to a young person who had had relatively little—

[00:14:54.93]

NELL BLAINE: Well, I had just a superficial introduction through Worden Day, which was really the language of it. But to really experience it in the classes we did with Hofmann was a very difficult thing. But I don't know. It was sort of challenging and exciting and new. [Cross talk.] And I was really full of enthusiasm. [Laughs.]

[00:15:17.34]

DOROTHY SECKLER: When he used those words, push and pull, you really knew what he was saying?

[00:15:22.08]

NELL BLAINE: His teaching was so dynamic and clear to me. It wasn't at all what the others—some of the others felt. I didn't find it mystical. To me, he really demonstrated with his diagrams so clearly, and I always have taught something of that method. I never found anything better, really. So I just thought he was a great teacher.

[00:15:47.07]

DOROTHY SECKLER: I did an article on his class once, and I thought it, you know, was just terrific experience. I didn't understand it, of course, but I mean, I just—

[00:15:59.07]

NELL BLAINE: Did you ever study with him, or work with him at all?

[00:16:01.71]

DOROTHY SECKLER: No, my husband studied with him, and I also knew in general what the concepts were. And gradually, I think, in the years probably after I did the article [laughs], I came to know more and more of what he had been talking about. But just as a performance, it was electrifying, without knowing exactly what the concepts involved, just the sense he



could give you of—I remember his speaking of the way—a very small form—what was it, a Paul Klee, something very small and wiry. And he gave me the feeling that it was really just making a kind of pulsation and movement through the total space around us, you know. Everything was changed by the existence of this form [laughs]. And you could almost feel it in your bones when he said it.

[00:17:02.67]

NELL BLAINE: Well, Hofmann had a great talent for being able to parameterize very clearly, and also that enthusiasm he had, I've never seen coming, emanating so strongly from anyone as a teacher. That's what really took me—[cross talk.]—great excitement about painting, and a broadness. It wasn't at all narrow. And I would see from year to year that his teaching would change with his enthusiasm, with an another involvement, either with Mondrian, and it would go to Bonheur, or then to Cezanne or—and he never lost touch with these other concepts. And I never thought he was stagnating ever as a teacher.

[00:17:44.32]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Was your work—it was largely abstract when you came into the class. Did it remain pretty much abstract? Of course, you were working from the figure, we understand, and your figures would have been abstracted. But the painting that you did—were you painting in addition to the work from the figure?

[00:18:04.06]

NELL BLAINE: I would go home. I used to have a long day. I had a job in the daytime at first, in a life insurance company. Hofmann's secretary, Mrs. Lindsay, Ms. Lindsay, got me a job there, so that we could talk a lot, and talk about Mr. Hofmann at lunch hour. [They laugh.] And then I would work at night with him and come home very late, and paint. I don't know how I managed it. But that, and a social life was very full, and I would sort of stagger to the life insurance company and misfile their numbers. But what were you saying [inaudible]?

[00:18:40.06]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, I was just—

[00:18:40.86]

NELL BLAINE: I was on another track.

[00:18:41.82]

DOROTHY SECKLER: I was trying to think about the—one of the things that sort of interested me about some of the Hofmann people that I have since, you know, interviewed later, when they became a mature artist, was that at this point where, in a way, Hofmann stood for abstraction. A good many of the strongest pupils were really not painting abstractly at the point where they left his classes. They had really gone off on some bent of their own, which often involved a certain amount of figuration. And he once told me, himself—he said, the strongest ones are always the ones that go against you—

[00:19:26.53]

NELL BLAINE: Yes.

[00:19:27.22]

DOROTHY SECKLER: And so I was wondering to what extent, perhaps you were, you know, carrying through completely abstract, or whether you would—

[00:19:35.41]

NELL BLAINE: Well, I was just beginning to work abstractly when I went with him, just having feeling towards it. And it began to crystallize more and more, and I became more and more abstract, except that there was this summer in the middle that I went to the country. And I just freely worked from nature in a way I never had before, and that was quite a difference. But then when I went back, I carried on with the very abstract, and became purer and purer. In fact, I felt he thought it was too pure in the abstraction.

[00:20:05.47]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Really?

[00:20:05.77]

NELL BLAINE: Yes, I felt that he felt I was fixing it too strongly. And at that point, I was very involved with Lee Bell and his ideas, which were Mondrian and Arp. And at that time, Mondrian died, and I visited his studio. It was left open to the public. You probably—uh, did you see that?

[00:20:24.90]

DOROTHY SECKLER: No, I didn't.

[00:20:25.71]

NELL BLAINE: Yeah, well, Harry Holtzman had opened the studio, and the brushes were exactly as he left them. And the placements of cardboard, the pure colors were still on the wall. And that was one of the most exciting moments. Again, I still remember that with great excitement. That stimulates. And it seemed like a sort of cathedral, completely apart from anything I'd ever seen. It was really away from the world. It was completely unworldly.

[00:20:59.43]

DOROTHY SECKLER: And you say Leland Bell at that time was working out of Mondrian and Arp?

[00:21:03.90]

NELL BLAINE: Right, yes. In fact, Leland had started in high school as an abstract painter mostly interested in Paul Klee. And then he had met Knaths.

[00:21:16.49]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:21:16.74]

NELL BLAINE: I think he sort of hung around and got things from him that way. And—so, he was a big influence on me, although he was very young. We were all the same age, De Niro, Lee, and myself.

[00:21:30.34]

DOROTHY SECKLER: What aspect of Mondrian interested you the most?

[00:21:34.33]

NELL BLAINE: Well, it was really basic vertical and horizontal relationships and the equilibrium, and then this very clean, fresh air that he seemed to have. I was really completely in love with Mondrian, the whole business, and then at that time—it was also timing. His first one-man show was at that time, and his—and then shortly after the show at the Modern Museum and the visit to the studio, all of us came there. And so I was a complete Mondrianite. And then I joined the American Abstract Artist Group. I was the youngest member.

[00:22:11.88]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm.

[00:22:12.58]

NELL BLAINE: In 1944. And then I had my first show, which was all very abstract.

[00:22:17.77]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Were you—in your own work, would you be closer to something like

"Pier and Ocean." with the vertical and horizontal block strokes in a field? Or would you be closer to something with the sort of color planes you would get in the—or possibly, you know, I remember your mentioning jazz. And this was later, I imagine, "Boogie—" you weren't thinking in terms of the "Victory Boogie Woogie" or that sort of—

[00:22:46.04]

NELL BLAINE: I liked the late Mondrian.

[00:22:47.54]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Did you?

[00:22:48.14]

NELL BLAINE: Very much. I was very excited about the late Mondrian, yes, more than the early ones. Now I am more interested in the earlier ones. [They laugh.] But the late ones were what I was most excited—

[00:22:59.72]

DOROTHY SECKLER: [Inaudible]

[00:22:59.84]

NELL BLAINE: I used flat rectangular patterns—

[00:23:02.33]

DOROTHY SECKLER: You did.

[00:23:02.51]

NELL BLAINE: —not so much the little squares, although I worked with all of that. You know, I tried it.

[00:23:07.76]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes. So that even when you were working with the figure, you were using that rather severe plane relationships in rendering the figure.

[00:23:19.19]

NELL BLAINE: Well not at first, but towards the end I was really getting away from the figure, probably too much for Hofmann's taste.

[00:23:25.61]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm, Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:23:25.73]

NELL BLAINE: It was—was—he said it's very synthetic, you know, too much synthesis is not good.

[00:23:32.21]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes, I know.

[00:23:35.67]

NELL BLAINE: —but, uh—[they laugh.]

[00:23:36.11]

DOROTHY SECKLER: That's something that I gradually came to realize too. He would sometimes say to my husband, "But she is a Negro girl!" You know. [Laughs.] He would make something out of it that was quite abstracted.

[00:23:49.07]

NELL BLAINE: By this time, I became so abstract that the figure didn't mean that much to me except as a drawing expression, and—

[00:23:56.12]

DOROTHY SECKLER: And how long were you there, actually, though?

[00:23:58.43]

NELL BLAINE: Just a little over two years.

[00:24:00.51]

DOROTHY SECKLER: So there were two years, and then the two summers—where were you working in the summer?

[00:24:03.95]

NELL BLAINE: Well, the first summer I got married. Then I went off to the Borscht Belt in the Catskills with my in-laws, who had a marvelous house with all the windows broken out. It was quite bizarre, and a complete change from my own rather puritanical background, and they were charming people. And my husband was in the Army. He was a musician and played the French horn, but very much in love with painting. And so I just painted the country there.

[00:24:34.93]

DOROTHY SECKLER: He was a painter?

[00:24:36.04]

[Cross talk.]

[00:24:36.22]

NELL BLAINE: No, he was interested in painting. No. He paints now, oddly enough. He's gone to painting now, but he then was a French horn player and a photographer. So he documented that period rather thoroughly. [They laugh.]

[00:24:51.94]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, so you—now here we are then at the end of the time when you were working with Hans, and then you had a one-man show?

[00:25:00.53]

NELL BLAINE: I had a one-man show in 1945. By this time, I had joined the Jane Street Group, through Hyde Solomon, who was then rather close to Cézanne, and was working towards abstraction. And then suddenly, he made another push in his work and was very close to us. And then there was a student named Judith Rothschild, who was Hofmann's—I mean, with Hofmann. And her ideas sort of fused with ours, and she was one of the first abstract people in the group. Gradually, we rather eased out some of the more realistic ones, and we were very dogmatic about our program. And now I look back on it, you know, a little ashamed—

[00:25:45.02]

DOROTHY SECKLER: [Laughs.]

[00:25:45.41]

NELL BLAINE: But we were so excited. We really thought that was the gospel, you know.

[00:25:49.10]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, that's what makes youth [inaudible].

[00:25:49.91]

[Cross talk.]

[00:25:51.31]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, you were very sure of yourself.

[00:25:53.60]

NELL BLAINE: [Inaudible] sure.

[00:25:57.23]

DOROTHY SECKLER: It was the way to be at that time. So how did the Jane Street Gallery come into existence?

[00:26:03.86]

NELL BLAINE: Well, actually, I came in a few months after that started, and some of the people I don't recall too clearly. But there was a small nucleus of the painters who just wanted to have a place to show, and they were semi-abstract. And then when I came in and Lee and Hart [ph], the quality changed, and it turned into a very abstract group. And gradually, as I said, these people left, and we looked for other members that were more of our persuasion.

[00:26:37.18]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:26:37.56]

NELL BLAINE: And there were some exceptions, such as Ida Fischer and Frances Eckstein, who were older ladies. All the rest of us were in our 20s or early 30s. And they painted differently. One of them had studied with Hofmann—Ida. And Frances was a primitive— [Audio distortion.] And so she was really the only exception to that.

[00:27:01.47]

DOROTHY SECKLER: It was sort of a cooperative in a way.

[00:27:03.60]

NELL BLAINE: It was the first cooperative that I know of that was a serious gallery in New York.

[00:27:10.20]

DOROTHY SECKLER: How did you actually make out?

[00:27:12.57]

NELL BLAINE: Well, financially, very badly because we each, as I recall, put in about eight dollars, which seemed a lot of money to us. And we all had jobs to support ourselves, and we each took turns keeping the gallery. And we had meetings, it seemed to me, almost every week to decide things and to relate what each one had observed during that time. It was hard. It was a difficult organization to maintain because it wasn't any one head of it.

[00:27:43.29]

And I became secretary just for convenience so that one person could sort of keep up with everything. But we weren't good at business, any of us, and we all had to learn to use the hammer and the nail. And we put up the walls, and the lights, and painted and did everything ourselves. And—

[00:28:03.79]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Did you get much of an audience?

[00:28:05.69]

NELL BLAINE: We got a good attendance, and Greenberg said somewhere, I think in *The Nation*, that it was the best gallery in New York. So we got that sort of coverage and things like *Cue* magazine and *The New Yorker*, and the art magazines, of course, wrote about it.

[00:28:25.21]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:28:25.60]

NELL BLAINE: So we had a good following. The openings were very lively. [They laugh.] Yeah. It was an exciting time.

[00:28:35.17]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes, it was.

[00:28:35.32]

NELL BLAINE: I really feel it was a very good education for us because we hung—each one of us hung our own show. We'd get one or two members to help us, and we went to other studios constantly. We felt we must keep up with everything that was going on. So we tried.

[00:28:54.13]

DOROTHY SECKLER: There really wasn't much—there weren't many galleries taking on unknown young abstract painters at that time.

[00:29:03.06]

NELL BLAINE: Not many. Peggy Guggenheim was one of the few, and shortly after that—or I'm not sure of the date, but around that time I was taken on by Putzel, Howard Putzel. And then he died. I was supposed to have the first show. And then he died during—

[00:29:19.47]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Was Hofmann with him for a while, too?

[00:29:20.34]

NELL BLAINE: Yes, Hofmann, and Pollock and Gottlieb, and I was the youngster. And then he also had some nice paintings of his own then. He had a good eye. And he had a Gris, or two, and number of interesting things.

[00:29:40.65]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Where was that located?

[00:29:41.88]

NELL BLAINE: It was on 57th Street. I think it was [number -Ed.] 67.

[00:29:44.85]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Oh, so you were really uptown then.

[00:29:45.90]

NELL BLAINE: We called it the 67 Gallery, yes. But that was a very brief success because the show never took place. But I was very excited because I had just gone to him cold, and taken one painting. And he said to me, "If you have other paintings like this, you're the hope of America."

[00:30:04.69]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Really? Now, what was that painting—what did that painting look like?

[00:30:07.78]

NELL BLAINE: It was a tall rectangle—I guess about five feet and with a white ground, pure white, and with red, blue, and gray shapes. I would say somewhat influenced by Arp and Miró, kind of, but a rather pure version, sort of a little—

[00:30:30.25]

DOROTHY SECKLER: —organic shapes.

[00:30:30.96]

NELL BLAINE: —jigsaw shapes. Organic, but sort of cut-out-looking shapes.

[00:30:35.79]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:30:38.38]

NELL BLAINE: And that painting was in my first show. And he came to my studio, and he was very delighted, and offered me a show. That was about the easiest thing that ever happened. [They laugh.] I guess I expected it would be cake after that. It was such a good beginning. He had been Peggy Guggenheim's buyer and had seen my work before that, because I had submitted to a young artist show, and I had sent an 8-foot painting, which was at that time—there weren't so many of these big paintings, and I had painted it on a poster board I found on the street, because my inspiration was so hot. [They laugh.] And I didn't have any canvas. I was very poor. So the poor thing has sort of fallen apart, and that was one that Greenberg had written about because I joined the abstract artists and shown it there, and he liked that. But—

[00:31:28.56]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Was that the one that was called the "White—"

[00:31:31.05]

NELL BLAINE: Oh, yeah, "White Creature."

[00:31:32.49]

DOROTHY SECKLER: "—Creature," yeah. But it was also one of these rather—

[00:31:37.92]

NELL BLAINE: No, it wasn't as meticulous, and this is one that Greenberg liked, and he rejected my other work. He felt that was the wrong direction for me altogether, and that was the one that made me the talent—

[00:31:49.38]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Now, how was this one different? It's quite different?

[00:31:55.65]

NELL BLAINE: It had more of a tactile quality. It was a quicker stroke, and it was a very, very, very fast kind of inspiration to it.

[00:32:06.27]

DOROTHY SECKLER: But not closed-in shapes?

[00:32:09.27]

NELL BLAINE: Well, they were outlined shapes. It was just mostly black and white, with a few touches of color, very—like a construction almost, that kept going up, a rhythmic construction.

[00:32:23.72]

DOROTHY SECKLER: In which the field of the—

[00:32:26.05]

NELL BLAINE: The field was white, and the shapes were white. But there were grays and—

[00:32:30.02]

DOROTHY SECKLER: —and little touches—

[00:32:30.68]

NELL BLAINE: —grays and little touches that made the forms come out, this sort of heavy—

[00:32:34.97]

DOROTHY SECKLER: It sounds very good.

[00:32:36.39]

NELL BLAINE: [Laughs.] [Inaudible.]

[00:32:39.02]

DOROTHY SECKLER: I hope you have a photograph of it for the archives.

[00:32:41.66]

NELL BLAINE: [Inaudible.] Oh, no, I don't think I do.

[00:32:44.21]

DOROTHY SECKLER: You don't?

[00:32:44.84]

NELL BLAINE: No, I forgot to send one of those.

[00:32:47.51]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, maybe I can look at it later. I'd like to see it.

[00:32:50.09]

NELL BLAINE: Yeah.

[00:32:50.93]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, did this then indicate a kind of direction in which you pursued for a while?

[00:32:55.31]

NELL BLAINE: That particular painting? No. It was after that that the cleaner forms came, and the more precise painting.

[00:33:04.67]

DOROTHY SECKLER: So in spite of—

[00:33:05.51]

NELL BLAINE: They became sort of more elegant.

[00:33:06.41]

DOROTHY SECKLER: —Greenberg you went right on being precise and—



[00:33:10.16]

NELL BLAINE: Absolutely.

[00:33:10.94]

DOROTHY SECKLER: [Inaudible.]

[00:33:12.01]

NELL BLAINE: He probably fired me on the open way. [They laugh.] But he was very kind and stuck his neck out, and in fact, he tried to pedal that painting to galleries, which was very touching. And he bawled out Peggy Guggenheim, I understand. I really don't have it on good authority, but that's what I was told, that he fought for that painting. And then he fought with Putzel, because Putzel didn't like the others, so there I lost Greenberg, and got Putzel.

[00:34:09.98]

[Pause.]

[Recorder stops, restarts.]

[00:34:11.45]

NELL BLAINE: [Inaudible] Yeah. There was one experience I felt that I had become a painter, like from one day to the next. There was a painting I did at Hofmann's, or rather drawing, and then I went home and did the painting. And I felt for the first time I'd used real color and had been very excited. I'm really in touch with my feelings, and I was putting it down directly. And I felt then ever after that this was a possibility, that I was in touch with feeling for the first time.

[00:34:41.60]

DOROTHY SECKLER: That's a very important statement. You know, I know what you mean [laughs][inaudible] such a [inaudible]—

[00:34:46.73]

NELL BLAINE: Well, I felt it in other people's work that suddenly a person had become—leapt from a student to an artist. I remember seeing a show of Wolf Kahn's, which I was quite excited—because he was a Hofmann student too, and I remembered this big change I felt in his work. And every now and then, I'd buy somebody's work, you know, at a very, very reduced budget. [They laugh.] And I have a number of those students' paintings at that time.

[00:35:17.61]

DOROTHY SECKLER: I remember Wolf's work when he was just a very young boy, doing those very delicate pastels that were sort of Banner-ish. But I imagine it was later in than that, because they were—

[00:35:32.55]

NELL BLAINE: His first show is the one I'm talking about at Hansa. Did you see that?

[00:35:36.51]

DOROTHY SECKLER: I'm not sure. I should have remembered it. I knew his brother, Peter, better, and it was through Peter that I got to see and his work. But I know what you mean about that point at which you are in touch with your feelings.

[00:35:55.51]

NELL BLAINE: It may have been that I—you know, with self-hypnosis, but I don't think so, because I still have that painting, and it's still marks that spot to me.

[00:36:04.30]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mmm. Once you have achieved that, does it then largely remain with you?

[00:36:15.08]

NELL BLAINE: Well, I felt it has. I did feel that, yes. I mean, you certainly have failures all along the way, but somehow that confidence, [cross talk] that inner confidence is still there, that you have recalled to it.

[00:36:27.77]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

[00:36:28.97]

NELL BLAINE: Or you can tap it.

[00:36:32.16]

DOROTHY SECKLER: It's reassuring. Sometimes the—it's not often, but sometimes you do see an artist like de Chirico, and you—

[00:36:40.71]

NELL BLAINE: You wonder what happened.

[00:36:41.83]

DOROTHY SECKLER: —wonder how on Earth that could have happened, yeah. But that's another story. So here we have you—then, of course, in '45, you were studying with the Hayter on printmaking.

[00:36:53.92]

NELL BLAINE: I got a grant from the Virginia Museum. It was the second one, and—

[00:36:58.38]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Had you had a show? You had shown work at the—meanwhile, hadn't you in Virginia Museum?

[00:37:03.97]

NELL BLAINE: Yes, I was showing in the Virginia Museum. I had a one man show around that time.

[00:37:06.12]

DOROTHY SECKLER: [Inaudible] and your mother had forgiven you.

[00:37:09.69]

NELL BLAINE: She took a little longer to forgive me. [Laughs.]

[00:37:14.73]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Really?

[00:37:15.48]

NELL BLAINE: Yeah. I don't think she'd completely accepted the fact that I left home yet. [They laugh.]

[00:37:21.33]

DOROTHY SECKLER: That's just pretty much only children, I'm afraid.

[00:37:25.02]

NELL BLAINE: Yeah.

[00:37:25.29]

DOROTHY SECKLER: But had you—by the way, I meant to ask you earlier, had you lived in a town, or on a farm or in—

[00:37:30.90]

NELL BLAINE: In Richmond.

[00:37:31.47]

DOROTHY SECKLER: In Richmond City?

[00:37:32.42]

NELL BLAINE: In the suburbs.

[00:37:33.95]

DOROTHY SECKLER: I see. So by this time, anyway, you had shown work there and were probably being acclaimed as, you know, a Richmond girl who was making good in the art field.

[00:37:45.45]

NELL BLAINE: A little bit. Modestly. Yes.

[00:37:47.91]

DOROTHY SECKLER: To some of the [inaudible].

[00:37:48.75]

NELL BLAINE: There was a—I can't remember his name now, but a very nice man who was the head of the museum then.

[00:37:54.33]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Was it [inaudible]?

[00:37:55.17]

NELL BLAINE: It was before his time.

[00:37:56.34]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Was it?

[00:37:56.76]

NELL BLAINE: Yes. And he gave me a show of these abstractions that was just after Hofmann, which was very unusual for, I guess, the younger people. And I had gotten the grant already while I was at Hofmann's. And so it was a big show, and it was very encouraging. Nothing happened. It was just an encouragement. But he sort of followed my work a few years.

[00:38:23.50]

DOROTHY SECKLER: And I imagine Hofmann was following your work. I mean, you'd left, but he—

[00:38:28.03]

NELL BLAINE: Well, I'd go back and visit him occasionally and see if he was still—

[00:38:31.69]

DOROTHY SECKLER: You didn't come to Provincetown, however, when he—

[00:38:33.91]

NELL BLAINE: Yes, I did.

[00:38:34.67]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Did you?

[00:38:34.96]

NELL BLAINE: Yes, I came.

[00:38:36.37]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Did you work with [inaudible]?

[00:38:36.67]

NELL BLAINE: I didn't work there, but I would go and listen to the criticism on occasion, and be reassured because I was always excited to hear—you know, he seemed to have such a perfect eye for what was wrong in the painting, what was weak, and what was working.

[00:38:54.55]

DOROTHY SECKLER: I know those criticisms of Provincetown were really fascinating. No one could ever fill up the vacuum that he left there, you know?

[00:39:04.87]

NELL BLAINE: No, I just can't imagine anyone ever being Hofmann.

[00:39:13.02]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Nothing like it. Well, then, to pick up at night, around the later '40s, did your friends continue to be that same group that you had begun to know in the Jane Street Gallery, Leland Bell and—

[00:39:30.51]

NELL BLAINE: Well, Leland Bell and Al Kresch are still very good friends, and Louisa. And I still am interested in what they're doing very much. And we have changed along the same lines to a certain extent.

[00:39:43.84]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Hyde Solomon, too, of course.

[00:39:46.08]

NELL BLAINE: Yes, Hyde too.

[00:39:47.10]

DOROTHY SECKLER: He has landscapes.

[00:39:49.56]

NELL BLAINE: That's right. We've worked along similar lines. I will say we've influenced each other in a way. And then it was later that Larry Rivers came into the group at the very end when we had moved up to Madison Avenue.

[00:40:03.69]

DOROTHY SECKLER: You hadn't known him at Hofmann's school then?

[00:40:06.33]

NELL BLAINE: No, that was before he went. When I first met him, he was a jazz musician, and didn't paint at all. And I was interested in jazz and knew a friend of his, Jack Freilicher, and Jane was his wife. And she had just started to major in literature at Brooklyn College, and she became interested in painting somewhat through me, as he did. And they thought I did "crazy" paintings, you know, the jazz talk of the day.

[00:40:33.81]

And he moved across the street from me, and those were rather wild times. [They laugh.] Oh, all sorts of addictions, I would say. But he painted a picture influenced by me on a drumhead. But to regress a little, the first thing he ever did was a copy of an *ARTnews* cover which showed a fragment of a Coptic textile. And he did a pencil rendering very realistically and brought it in and said, "Do I have any talent?" [Laughs.] And that was his first thing,

[00:41:11.70]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Oh! [Inaudible.]

[00:41:11.97]

NELL BLAINE: And he had never read any books, or been to a museum, or knew a thing about it, or had any interest in it as far as I knew. And he had a very limited vocabulary, pure jazz talk, and he'd had a very strange background and mostly started very young playing jazz, and beginning to make up songs, slightly risqué. [They laugh.]

[00:41:38.44]

DOROTHY SECKLER: That figures. But of course, your husband was in jazz at this time.

[00:41:41.38]

NELL BLAINE: Well, no, he was a classical musician, but he loved jazz.

[00:41:43.96]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Oh, was he? Oh.

[00:41:44.08]

NELL BLAINE: And it was really through him I really hit on the jazz. And Lee Bell was a jazz drummer. And I took up the drums really under his auspices. And the great jazz musician that we loved was Lester Young. And that was his great passion, the Basie band, but particularly Lester Young. And then shortly after that, it was Larry Rivers and his friends who introduced us to Charlie Parker and this later bop jazz. And we were there to hear the first notes that Charlie played at Carnegie Hall, and so on. And we had many jazz sessions together. We used to—we played—

[00:42:25.26]

DOROTHY SECKLER: You really did play the drums with the whole group pretty consistently?

[00:42:28.02]

NELL BLAINE: Well, I didn't play very professionally. I played more for myself, and then I would play informally with a group. But these musicians were the best. They just weren't quite known, but they were very good. So I wasn't quite in that rank.

[00:42:43.75]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Those must've been great years. You were living now—

[00:42:47.46]

NELL BLAINE: —on 21st Street.

[00:42:48.57]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Your husband moved into that loft, too.

[00:42:51.12]

NELL BLAINE: Right, yes. That's right.

[00:42:54.27]

DOROTHY SECKLER: And of course, he was busy with what? Did he—

[00:42:58.62]

NELL BLAINE: He was still in the Army for several years.

[00:43:00.78]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Oh, I see.

[00:43:01.08]

NELL BLAINE: But he had a lot of free time. He was never shipped overseas, fortunately. And he played for the Army on the radio and played troops out at the docks. And he would have been a CO if he were to have been confronted with going overseas, I know. But jazz was a big part of our lives, very big. Musicians were always dropping over, and big sessions, and record sessions. And then off to the recording studios. We would go weekly. And then we followed Billie Holiday and all these people in clubs for the price of a beer.

[00:43:41.82]

DOROTHY SECKLER: It must have been very—a great time, really. [Audio cuts out.] What is it like—The period of the 1950s was a period of a good bit of travel. Did you win some grants to get you started off traveling in France and Italy?

[00:43:59.11]

NELL BLAINE: No, I for a long time wanted to go to France, of course, and the only thing I could think of doing was to—I took a job with United Jewish Appeal as Art Director. I had done a little bit of advertising in college and just enough to get to New York, save my money, but I hadn't done any in between. And so I had to pick it up very quickly, and through Clement Greenberg's brother—he got me a job. He worked there. And I got the art directorship, but I had to really sort of cram to hold the job. And I saved enough in six months to go to Europe, where I was fortunate to get a wonderful studio. Larry Rivers was over there, and he helped me find it. [Cross talk.].

[00:44:45.25]

DOROTHY SECKLER: In what part of Europe was this?

[00:44:46.52]

NELL BLAINE: This was in Paris, in Montparnasse, and I had the studio. It was an old French studio right on the garden behind the Grande Chaumiere. And it was five dollars a month. [They laugh.]

[00:44:58.00]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Oh, that's incredible.

[00:45:00.44]

NELL BLAINE: And it had a garden, and wonderful light, and I shared it with the sculptor, Harold Cousins, who was then doing sort of wood carving, rather primitive wood carving. He's since become a welding sculptor. But he was there in the morning, and I was there in the afternoon. So it was quite private. For five dollars, I didn't complain. [They laugh.]

[00:45:21.15]

DOROTHY SECKLER: See, that's an amazing adventure. That was 1950. How long did you stay in Paris?

[00:45:27.14]

NELL BLAINE: I was there for six months, and then I made a trip to Italy.

[00:45:30.17]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, before we leave Paris, was there anything that happened, well, in the art that you saw in Paris? Here you were coming for the first time to the Old World, and you probably spent a fair amount of time in the Louvre, did you?

[00:45:43.37]

NELL BLAINE: Of course.

[00:45:43.85]

DOROTHY SECKLER: This this throw you at all or change your feelings about painting at all?

[00:45:47.84]

NELL BLAINE: Well, my feelings about painting were already in transition. I was already beginning to move away from abstraction, and beginning to use more of tactile quality and some figuration—not a lot, but it was semi-abstract. And—

[00:46:07.19]

DOROTHY SECKLER: How would—

[00:46:07.61]

NELL BLAINE: That gave me the push. I really think that I began to feel that the greatest pleasure in the world was to sit out on the banks of the Seine and draw those scenes. And I was just so taken with the visual, just the look of the city. It's the first beautiful city I had seen. And nature took over, and I realized that I had been depriving myself of some wonderful sensuous pleasure with painting. And I just kind of let go, and my painting changed completely in Paris and—whereas some people, I'm sure, just thought of it as a transitional period. I was just—I was never so happy. I realized I closed the door to some part of painting.

[00:46:53.05]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes. When you were sketching at the Seine, would you have been sketching in crayon or with what kind of materials [inaudible]?

[00:46:59.62]

NELL BLAINE: Well, this whole period I began to draw in ink and brush, with a feeling of the liquid quality of the ink, and that led me in my painting, again, to a looser quality—

[00:47:10.93]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Was this colored ink or black-and-white ink?

[00:47:12.64]

NELL BLAINE: Just black and white ink—

[END OF TRACK AAA\_blaine67\_8400\_m.]

[00:00:05.78]

NELL BLAINE: So most of my drawings were direct from nature with black and white ink, mostly landscapes. And I did drawings of the Seine. And then, when I went to Florence, I made studies of the city.

[00:00:18.35]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Were you aware, as you made drawings out of doors, of organizing the

landscape into planes, somewhat reflecting what you had absorbed, I imagine, from Hoffman, in all your abstract training?

[00:00:32.87]

NELL BLAINE: Well, I moved far from Hoffman, really. I was already quite influenced by Léger. I think Léger was the biggest influence in making the transition. Léger and Héliou. Héliou was also influenced by Léger. But when he was in the concentration camp—you know about that?

[00:00:50.72]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

[00:00:51.62]

NELL BLAINE: He changed philosophically. Everything changed for him. And I had seen one of his shows, and it didn't get good attention. And I—he became less popular.

[00:01:03.96]

DOROTHY SECKLER: The one with the umbrellas?

[00:01:05.13]

NELL BLAINE: Yes, and the men reading the newspapers. And then I met Héliou, and I was very taken with him personally, too. He was extremely articulate and friendly, and he had this marvelous, big studio. I'd never seen a studio like that. [Audio cuts out.] It was like a church and with a great balcony, and just huge. And he was so prolific. And he would show his paintings very freely to younger painters. He had a kind of open house on Saturdays, and he would just tirelessly bring out paintings, and let you look at them. Extremely nice. And—

[00:01:43.26]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Did you meet Léger, too?

[00:01:44.55]

NELL BLAINE: I did meet Léger, yeah. I met a girl who was studying with him, and I went up and watched the class in progress. And you know, I didn't really get to know him, but I met him, and I was very impressed by him.

[00:01:54.91]

DOROTHY SECKLER: What was he doing at that time?

[00:01:58.17]

NELL BLAINE: He was teaching GIs in a very large school in Montmartre near Place Clichy.

[00:02:04.31]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm.

[00:02:04.79]

NELL BLAINE: And there, he—it was quite interesting. The woman I gather who was his mistress, and whose husband owned the building that Léger got—rented the studio from—she had her daughter, who was about 17 or 18. They both had sweaters with Léger emblems. It was like a Léger club. [They laugh.] I remember these emblems being sewn on, and she acted as an interpreter for the GIs, because Léger didn't speak English. And you could hear her sort of putting her own words and wording, you know, and influencing, and pushing. [They laugh.] So she—

[00:02:44.39]

DOROTHY SECKLER: What aspect of Léger's work impressed you at that time?



[00:02:49.67]

NELL BLAINE: Well, I was always impressed by his organization, and the rhythm that he would get with cascading forms that would go one into the other. That was true of all of his work, even the most simple ones, I thought. And that, I think, even influenced me in the things from nature, or rather loosened me up a bit. It seems to have gotten somehow into my work. And I never felt he was really primarily abstract. And he, himself, of course never felt that he was.

[00:03:19.89]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes. And so, when you were sketching the Seine, you really were organizing nature into a scheme that might have been a little closer to these cascading planes than to the plane structure in—

[00:03:33.79]

NELL BLAINE: Yeah, it wasn't so conscious. I was just freely doing nature things. But, I mean, as I look back on it, it's clear that these forms did come out of that.

[00:03:43.02]

DOROTHY SECKLER: But it wasn't a hard, linear kind of sketching. It was really very open. The forms were, I assume, rather open, and sketchy.

[00:03:49.26]

NELL BLAINE: Rather open forms, yeah. But lots of little blocks of shapes when it came to building matter.

[00:03:57.60]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:03:58.13]

NELL BLAINE: But it did have that kind of organization, and I think it helped me come back to nature more freely, all that that tight discipline I had with abstraction. I never felt that confident drawing from nature before.

[00:04:12.21]

DOROTHY SECKLER: That's interesting. I've noticed this—

[00:04:14.22]

[Recording stops, restarts.]

[00:04:30.60]

DOROTHY SECKLER: This is Dorothy Seckler resuming an interview with Nell Blaine in New York on June 15, 1967. Nell, we had been talking about the end of the '40s, and the beginning of the '50s. You had gone to Paris, had a wonderful experience at a marvelous studio there, and working—being influenced by Héliou and Léger, and working much more from nature, sketching with ink—very free sketches along the banks of the Seine, and recovering a feeling from nature. And how long were you there?

[00:05:25.47]

NELL BLAINE: Only six months.

[00:05:26.64]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Six months. And then you went on to Italy?

[00:05:28.92]

NELL BLAINE: I went to Italy for a month. Mostly spent the time in Florence.

[00:05:34.92]

DOROTHY SECKLER: What was it like in Florence? Was it summer or winter when you were there?

[00:05:38.82]

NELL BLAINE: It was very cold and damp. It was—

[00:05:40.89]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Did you meet Alvin there in the cold?

[00:05:42.96]

NELL BLAINE: Yes, I did. [Laughs.]

[00:05:44.10]

DOROTHY SECKLER: I remember Alvin Ross's stories about those damp winters. [Laughs.]

[00:05:49.62]

NELL BLAINE: Yes, I did see him there.

[00:05:52.80]

DOROTHY SECKLER: And so, it was not the beautiful, sunny Italy that most of us remember from summer?

[00:05:58.60]

NELL BLAINE: Well, it was—the weather wasn't bad, except for the dampness in these old palazzos.

[00:06:02.89]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yeah.

[00:06:03.40]

NELL BLAINE: And I was rather poor, and so I had a room with a tiny little stove, and a huge room, and just a little round black stove that you put wood into.

[00:06:16.39]

DOROTHY SECKLER: And how did Italy strike you, as far as being now in a country where every stone was art, and so on? And not only art, but history.

[00:06:25.24]

NELL BLAINE: I'm afraid I was one of those suckers. [They laugh.] I was bowled over both by Paris and Italy. I couldn't have been more so. The paintings seemed extraordinary. The Louvre just—especially those large paintings.

[00:06:44.62]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Which one?

[00:06:45.28]

NELL BLAINE: Delacroix.

[00:06:46.21]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Delacroix?

[00:06:46.71]

NELL BLAINE: Oh, Delacroix and Courbet.

[00:06:48.73]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes?

[00:06:49.33]

NELL BLAINE: And Larry Rivers, the same way. The burial painting, just—

[00:06:53.38]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Worked out.

[00:06:54.01]

NELL BLAINE: Yes. And when he came back to New York, he did a burial with the same psychological thing, that the grave was in the foreground.

[00:07:02.57]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes?

[00:07:03.49]

NELL BLAINE: But it was a kind of Jewish burial. But he transformed the Courbet—

[00:07:07.33]

DOROTHY SECKLER: [Laughs.] Oh.

[00:07:09.85]

NELL BLAINE: But I saw that with him, and I remembered, he didn't do much painting in France. He was mostly traveling.

[00:07:16.18]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Were you with Larry? Did you meet him again in Italy? In Paris?

[00:07:19.85]

NELL BLAINE: No. No, mostly just in Paris I saw him.

[00:07:23.29]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Uh-huh [affirmative]. So Delacroix and Courbet. Of course, that figures, naturally. And I suppose a little Chardin, and—

[00:07:30.76]

NELL BLAINE: Oh, well, yeah. And the wonderful figure of the clown. Oh, it just went out of my head.

[00:07:39.19]

DOROTHY SECKLER: [Laughs.] The clown.

[00:07:40.96]

NELL BLAINE: You know, the great white clown. The French painter.

[00:07:48.70]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Uh, which century? [Laughs.] Nineteenth?

[00:07:52.84]

NELL BLAINE: Around the time of Boucher. You know who I mean. Oh, isn't that awful? I get

terrible with names.

[00:07:57.19]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, Fragonard or Boucher—no. Watteau.

[00:08:00.10]

NELL BLAINE: Yes.

[00:08:03.43]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Watteau. Yes.

[00:08:03.76]

NELL BLAINE: That's right.

[00:08:04.27]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Gilles.

[00:08:05.29]

NELL BLAINE: That one particularly.

[00:08:06.82]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes, that is a big—yes. Natural. Love of yours [ph], too.

[00:08:12.13]

NELL BLAINE: And the Poussins.

[00:08:13.30]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

[00:08:14.20]

NELL BLAINE: And Ingres.

[00:08:14.95]

DOROTHY SECKLER: [Laughs.]

[00:08:15.10]

NELL BLAINE: Well, I could go on. I mean, it's all of it—overwhelming.

[00:08:19.00]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes. I don't suppose you did any copying in the Louvre, of traditional artists?

[00:08:21.73]

NELL BLAINE: No, I never did that. I never could bring myself to do it, although I respect the patience of those people who do.

[00:08:28.30]

DOROTHY SECKLER: [Laughs.] Well, it takes a lot of courage, I think, especially for an American.

[00:08:33.97]

NELL BLAINE: I never could work in public with people around me, with the thought that they were about to interrupt me. And I worked in the park, but every time, it throws me. And

I've had bad experiences. Once, I was painting in Central Park, out of the way, and a charming little girl came and spoke to me, and I was friendly with her. She went away, and she threw a stone in a paper bag that landed exactly in my palette. And I was really absolutely dismayed. [They laugh.]

[00:09:03.95]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, anyway, so then you didn't paint in the Louvre. But then, getting you back to Italy, and, of course, the Uffizi was there in Florence. And who were your particular loves among the painters there?

[00:09:19.13]

NELL BLAINE: Well, Bellini, Raphael, and the Sieneese painters were just—it's just a long list, I'm afraid.

[00:09:28.79]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Giorgione, I suppose.

[00:09:32.21]

NELL BLAINE: Oh, Giorgione.

[00:09:32.29]

DOROTHY SECKLER: All the Venetians would have had [inaudible] [laughs].

[00:09:35.94]

NELL BLAINE: Titian, too.

[00:09:39.76]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Oh, yeah.

[00:09:40.90]

NELL BLAINE: Veronese. You don't want me to give a long list. [They laugh.]

[00:09:43.01]

DOROTHY SECKLER: No. Well, how did your painting change at this point again?

[00:09:48.05]

NELL BLAINE: Well, this is still part of the same transition, which continued when I came back. I would say that there were about three or four years of this transition until about 1954, and then it crystallized more into a kind of abstract impressionism. I hate the label, but—

[00:10:07.62]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm. Well, it helps a little. [Laughs.] But at this time, were you doing much painting on canvas with oils in—while you were in Europe?

[00:10:18.44]

NELL BLAINE: Yes, in France I did because I had a good studio. [Cross talk.] And I intended to study French, and do a lot more in the way of working. But after I got to working, that was all I wanted to do—that and look at paintings. So I didn't do too much sightseeing. I saw very little of the rest of France, except for Chartres. I didn't even go to Chambord, or any of the great buildings.

[00:10:43.61]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Oh, well.

[00:10:44.39]

NELL BLAINE: Yeah.

[00:10:45.36]

DOROTHY SECKLER: [Inaudible] quite so important. [Laughs.] And then, when you were in Italy, did you get a chance to—did you get to Venice and Rome also?

[00:10:52.14]

NELL BLAINE: No, I just got to Rome, and I intended to go to Venice. But Florence had so much to offer, I'd rather have—you know, I wanted to see more there. And I could have just stayed on in Florence.

[00:11:05.12]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Why did you leave? The money'd run out, I imagine.

[00:11:08.18]

NELL BLAINE: In fact, when I came back to the New York docks, I had exactly one dollar in my pocket. But actually, I did, and I couldn't even take my bags off. I had to have a friend take me home in a taxi.

[00:11:21.98]

DOROTHY SECKLER: [Laughs.] Oh, I know. That happened to me—

[00:11:23.76]

NELL BLAINE: So, one dollar. I was cutting it very close.

[00:11:28.31]

DOROTHY SECKLER: [Laughs.] When I came over here for the first time, I had to be put out of the taxi with my baggage half a mile from where I was going home. [Laughs.]

[00:11:37.76]

NELL BLAINE: Oh, really? Oh, horrible. Oh, there were a lot of those things attached to that. They decided I had an obscene book with me, which it wasn't at all. It was just a copy of *Kangaroo* by D.H. Lawrence, but they took an endless amount of time thumbing through it.

[00:11:54.23]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Oh. [Laughs.]

[00:11:55.73]

NELL BLAINE: And they held my bags of that, and I had to go back.

[00:11:59.57]

DOROTHY SECKLER: But when you got home it was, what, 1950—?

[00:12:02.66]

NELL BLAINE: Well, it was December. It was the same year.

[00:12:06.02]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Same year. I see. Yeah. Most of the year. And then what did you do in the next few years in New York? You were absorbing the lessons of Europe, obviously. Were you still in this—How about your husband?

[00:12:18.53]

NELL BLAINE: Well, that was over.

[00:12:20.06]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Oh, I see.

[00:12:20.69]

NELL BLAINE: Yes, before I went to Europe. 'Cause we were married six years, and I was—

[00:12:25.22]

DOROTHY SECKLER: And you didn't have any children?

[00:12:26.51]

NELL BLAINE: No children.

[00:12:27.29]

DOROTHY SECKLER: I see. So when you came back, did you go back to this loft on 21st?

[00:12:30.80]

NELL BLAINE: I went back to my old loft, which I had sublet, and gotten back, and started to think about making a living. [Audio cuts out.] That's when I went into the designing business to support the painting.

[00:12:46.37]

DOROTHY SECKLER: And was this—this wasn't the time with Alvin?

[00:12:49.93]

NELL BLAINE: Yes.

[00:12:50.36]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Or was it?

[00:12:51.05]

NELL BLAINE: Yes. Just when I came back from Europe, I went into business with Alvin Ross.

[00:12:54.74]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Uh-huh [affirmative].

[00:12:55.37]

NELL BLAINE: And designing mostly layout and typography. And then I began to do things for galleries, doing their brochures. And around that time, I got into Tibor de Nagy Gallery.

[00:13:05.78]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Oh, yes.

[00:13:06.71]

NELL BLAINE: And with Larry. He sort of got me in there. But he was the big star, of course, and Grace Hartigan. And I got a little tired of that. So when the Poindexter opened, I joined them.

[00:13:24.02]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. But that was not until '56?

[00:13:25.85]

NELL BLAINE: '56, yeah.

[00:13:27.26]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes. So during '50—between '50 and '56, you were painting largely landscapes, were you, when—

[00:13:34.85]

NELL BLAINE: No, I did still lifes, interiors, and kind of imaginary paintings—mostly from imagination of figures in landscapes, not very realistic. But you know, you could clearly tell it was a figure, and—but there wouldn't be a face on the head, you know. It would be kind of—

[00:13:53.40]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Figures—distant figures, or close-up figures? I mean, they're really—

[00:13:57.09]

NELL BLAINE: Well, in the middle ground. It's sort of almost tapestry-like, at times—large paintings of figures. And then, when I did still lifes, those were usually smaller paintings, and more brilliant. The colors became more diluted with white, and more pastel at this period. And I spent summers occasionally in Gloucester. I got a nice, big studio there, and I loved it there.

[00:14:26.85]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm. And the light is so beautiful in that whole area, too. Well, you were painting—had your method of painting changed a good bit when you were working in Gloucester and in New York? Did you, let's say, start off painting with white on the canvas, or did you tone it—[cross talk].

[00:14:46.17]

NELL BLAINE: Well, the transitional period still held to flat-shaped, more mosaic-like, but still a little almost cubist. And then that gradually—[Audio cuts out] —went into a more feathery brush stroke, and more sensuous brush stroke—more calligraphy, but still maintaining some of that feeling of mosaic, or tapestry. And then gradually, forms got a little bit larger with this same—using the brush and the paint a little thicker.

[00:15:20.16]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative] But it was—

[00:15:21.03]

NELL BLAINE: A little more sensuous. I think it got just more sensuous as it went on.

[00:15:24.69]

DOROTHY SECKLER: It was direct painting, in other words. You didn't do much overpainting, or you didn't glaze, for instance.

[00:15:29.82]

NELL BLAINE: No, I never have gone in for the technical, a lot of technical work, underpainting or any of that. Never has appealed to me.

[00:15:40.32]

DOROTHY SECKLER: And your palette—was it getting close to what it is now? Does it have that light-saturated quality of [inaudible]?

[00:15:47.46]

NELL BLAINE: The light saturation began to seem more intense with a trip to Mexico.

[00:15:55.44]



DOROTHY SECKLER: Uh-huh [affirmative]. And there, I really began to fall in love with certain kinds of colors together that would be struck off. Maybe you would see them with dahlias and croton, or certain flowers that people would put together. And then the light, of course, was more intense there. But I think that affected my palette as much as anything.

[00:16:13.71]

DOROTHY SECKLER: And that was when?

[00:16:15.21]

NELL BLAINE: '57. That's right. That's when it really became more heightened and more emphasis on the kind of saturated light. And I try to get a single luminous image when possible.

[00:16:29.37]

DOROTHY SECKLER: You have never of course, talked so far, about being very much involved with the Impressionists themselves. When you were in France, you didn't talk much about Monet or even Bonnard, which one might have—

[00:16:42.55]

NELL BLAINE: I didn't talk about it, but it was true that I was involved.

[00:16:45.43]

DOROTHY SECKLER: You were. Uh-huh [affirmative].

[00:16:46.05]

NELL BLAINE: Yes, the Impressionists Museum, I found was a big experience. I really did become more excited by them. Also being in touch with the actual landscapes that they painted, I think the minute the boat landed, I was involved. It seemed going into Le Havre was Boudin and Monet right away.

[00:17:07.95]

DOROTHY SECKLER: That's true. And that was when you were in Mexico, this even seemed to come out more in terms of the hotter and cooler colors, I mean warmer yellows, and oranges, and reds? Some reds are coming into it now.

[00:17:23.49]

NELL BLAINE: They became stronger, the colors, and I think the light became more intense, and my interest in that sort of single image of a group.

[00:17:34.23]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Could you talk about the single image? In terms of Hoffman, of course he talks a great deal about conceiving the painting, as a—you see not an individual woman, and chair, and tree, and dahlia, and so on, but the total configuration. But do you mean something beyond that?

[00:17:57.25]

NELL BLAINE: Well, I don't find that too easy to explain. It's sort of a concept to simplify and integrate to the point where the light became a kind of simplified. It's not so much the Impressionist concept where there are lots of flickering light, and it's still related very much to a realistic concept of light. But I think in a way it became more abstract in the concept of light. But I'm not—I find it difficult to explain.

[00:18:29.47]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, perhaps it would help if you could think of, to what extent, when faced with an actual landscaping in Mexico—Where were you in Mexico, by the way?

[00:18:40.78]

NELL BLAINE: I spent most of my time in Oaxaca. I traveled through Mexico, from Mexico City down to Chiapas. And that was a very exciting spot, Chiapas, because the Indians were more primitive and each one had kept the costume of centuries before. Have you been there?

[00:18:59.77]

DOROTHY SECKLER: No, I have not. I'd like to go.

[00:19:01.33]

NELL BLAINE: And it it's a very isolated place, mountainous, and fairly exotic. And the Indians are rather threatening, actually.

[00:19:10.60]

DOROTHY SECKLER: You were alone, were you?

[00:19:10.81]

NELL BLAINE: They were hostile to tourists. I went alone. Yeah.

[00:19:13.66]

DOROTHY SECKLER: You were courageous. [Laughs.]

[00:19:15.88]

NELL BLAINE: But I was with friends at one point. But then I was on my own most of the time. And then I drove back with another friend from Mexico right up to Richmond and New York. We drove back in a Jeep.

[00:19:30.94]

DOROTHY SECKLER: But you were alone. You went off to this Indian—this is a village, Chiapas, or a small town or—

[00:19:36.85]

NELL BLAINE: Chiapas is the state, like Oaxaca is a state.

[00:19:40.66]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

[00:19:40.96]

NELL BLAINE: But it was San Cristobal de Las Casas, was the town. And they were really very primitive villages all around. Each different Indian tribe, the Zinacantepec and Huasteco. And they all kept these black and white costumes. Some had colored ribbons. And they all had, you know, symbols, these items of costume. And the Natives were in this area—the male was the glamorous one. In other areas the female was. You'd see that the female would trail the male. And they were rather like ballet dancers, very colorful people. The markets were extremely colorful, very much like Guatemala. It was nearer to Guatemala, this part of Mexico.

[00:20:26.23]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, did you actually go outside and paint there, or did you sketch outside?

[00:20:30.28]

NELL BLAINE: When I was in Oaxaca, I had my own house. I rented a little house and had my own garden. And it was in a very lush part near the ruins, and—At a place called Los Molinos and—near Juarez, this town. And there I just painted interior still lifes, and from imagination. But I did drawings from landscape, some watercolors. But mostly I worked in the studio.

[00:20:56.94]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm. Well, working in the studio, from sketches, then you wouldn't feel any question at all about reinventing what you were—this landscape you were doing, I mean you were constantly reworking it abstractly, I imagine.

[00:21:15.09]

NELL BLAINE: Until this point. Later on, I dropped working from imagination almost entirely.

[00:21:20.85]

DOROTHY SECKLER: You did?

[00:21:21.42]

NELL BLAINE: But I was still doing it there.

[00:21:23.28]

DOROTHY SECKLER: You were?

[00:21:23.88]

NELL BLAINE: I was absorbing the color and the forms, and would occasionally work from a sketch. But after a while I've abandoned that altogether. I very rarely work from a sketch.

[00:21:33.72]

DOROTHY SECKLER: No.

[00:21:34.41]

NELL BLAINE: No, I worked from nature almost entirely.

[00:21:37.86]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Actually on the spot.

[00:21:39.17]

NELL BLAINE: Absolutely.

[00:21:40.18]

DOROTHY SECKLER: That's interesting that you completely reversed, or completely reversed.

[00:21:43.20]

[They laugh.]

[00:21:43.56]

NELL BLAINE: I completely reversed it in 25 years.

[00:21:45.47]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Oh, that's really fascinating. We must be sure we get to that. Because I think this is really what makes this tape so interesting, that at each stage you're recapitulating a kind of a history, but very consciously. [Laughs.] So that in Mexico then, you were painting still somewhat from sketches, but—and somewhat inventing nature, and with this warmer palette, and painting very directly.

[00:22:13.07]

NELL BLAINE: Yes. I also do things from the flowers. I think perhaps those gave me the colors more than anything. But when I did the still life, I worked directly from nature.

[00:22:24.05]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes. The atmospheric quality of light, or light considered as a kind of envelope, is something that you can use or discard. You don't feel bound by it. The fact that a certain kind of light envelops a scene needn't stop you from same time letting very sharp contrasts come through in certain places.

[00:22:55.23]

NELL BLAINE: No. I don't feel bound to copy the way the light is, or for instance, the shadows coming in a certain direction. It's some quality of light that's much more abstract that I'm after. And I really feel much freer than that when I do it.

[00:23:09.30]

DOROTHY SECKLER: I assume so. In any case. Well, so here we had you in Mexico in Oaxaca, and then going back to New York in what, '58? Or was it—

[00:23:20.94]

NELL BLAINE: No, well that particular year, I was very fortunate to go to Yaddo and to be invited to Yaddo in June and then to go straight to Mexico after a period of painting there, to come back and go directly to MacDowell Colony, and to be reinvited to Yaddo again for the winter. [Cross talk.] So I had the nine months of uninterrupted painting. [Cross talk.] That was a great year.

[00:23:45.57]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes, you were at Yaddo a year after I was there.

[00:23:49.17]

NELL BLAINE: How was it?

[00:23:50.43]

DOROTHY SECKLER: 1956. It was beautiful. That must have been just a great period.

[00:23:56.24]

NELL BLAINE: That was a great period of work, just constant work. And the Yaddo, I loved drawing in the garden there and in the woods. Except for the mosquitoes, it was great.

[00:24:06.40]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Oh, the deer flies and the mosquitoes. How did you ever manage?

[00:24:09.19]

NELL BLAINE: The one time I was drawing by—I picked a bad spot by the little pool where the waterfall—

[00:24:14.95]

DOROTHY SECKLER: I remember that.

[00:24:15.70]

NELL BLAINE: And I was just covered with mosquitoes, my whole face, and arms, and legs. I had to give up.

[00:24:20.82]

DOROTHY SECKLER: You didn't even have "6-12?" [Laughs.]

[00:24:22.48]

NELL BLAINE: That didn't make a dent in those mosquitoes.

[00:24:25.76]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, they always can sit on your eyelids I found, even with the "6-12." Yeah, that was a difficulty at Yaddo, I must admit.

[00:24:33.55]

NELL BLAINE: Well, it was just a bad spot I picked, though.

[00:24:35.65]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well even, all most of Yaddo, is pretty—that was one of the things. But anyway, I still loved it. But then in '59, you were back to Italy, Egypt, Turkey, and Greece. And how did that happen?

[00:24:50.81]

NELL BLAINE: Yeah. Well I was fortunate during this time to begin to sell paintings gradually more, so that I didn't have—

[00:24:57.24]

DOROTHY SECKLER: You were at Poindexter now. You were at—

[00:24:58.79]

NELL BLAINE: Through Poindexter.

[00:24:59.24]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

[00:24:59.45]

NELL BLAINE: From '56. And I had a number of shows there. And each one seemed a little more promising that way. So I was able to just take off on this trip and you know, sell paintings as I went, really.

[00:25:16.16]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Great. What kind of collectors were interested in your paintings at that time?

[00:25:21.38]

NELL BLAINE: Well there were a few decorators. One was Ward Bennett. He is an interior designer, rather. And he was introducing me to other people. And I got a patron through him named Arthur Cohen, who has stayed with me all these years, and buys paintings every year.

[00:25:41.69]

DOROTHY SECKLER: That's great.

[00:25:42.29]

NELL BLAINE: And during the time I was in the hospital, he was giving me a monthly sum. It really gave me a couple of grants, actually, and guaranteed to buy a picture a month. So he's really been a marvelous patron, and a friend. And during—since 1956, he has appeared on the scene wherever I paint, whether it's Greece, or England, or wherever, he's visited to see the first painting. So his interest is very, very touching.

[00:26:13.10]

DOROTHY SECKLER: So you set off then with a little money in your pocket, to Egypt. What did you do in Egypt?

[00:26:20.27]

NELL BLAINE: Well, I planned mostly just to travel on the Nile and see the ruins the Karnak, Luxor, and the tombs. And I arranged an advance for a tour on a boat where we just lived on the boat. It was a wonderful old Mississippi steamboat type of thing. And at night the boat would stop. It was quite leisurely. It took about two weeks. And they would have a band, and entertainment. And then it would proceed very slowly. And it would stay four or five days in Luxor, and at different points all the way to Aswan. And—so we could see everything very carefully. And then I came back by train. So the whole thing was living on the boat and seeing the—

[00:27:04.21]

DOROTHY SECKLER: So you weren't working much, you were really being a tourist?

[00:27:06.55]

NELL BLAINE: No. On that trip that was just purely seeing.

[00:27:09.95]

DOROTHY SECKLER: And you went to Turkey?

[00:27:11.86]

NELL BLAINE: Then I went briefly to Turkey, just to continue the sightseeing. And then I went to Greece, to paint.

[00:27:16.78]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

[00:27:17.32]

NELL BLAINE: That's where I went to settle down and paint. I thought it would be less expensive. And also I thought the light would be marvelous.

[00:27:22.81]

DOROTHY SECKLER: And it was.

[00:27:23.35]

NELL BLAINE: And the landscape. It was.

[00:27:25.41]

DOROTHY SECKLER: —in October. [Inaudible].

[00:27:27.70]

NELL BLAINE: And they have government studios in Greece, you know.

[00:27:30.64]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes, the one where that I planned to go was being redone. So I didn't get to do it. But I was—

[00:27:38.02]

NELL BLAINE: Where did you plan to go?

[00:27:39.07]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well I had part—I had sort of been torn between Mykonos and Hydra. Then I decided on Hydra but Hydra was being redone. The whole place is being renovated, and so on. [Inaudible] Greece. [Kaldis—you know Kaldis? -Ed.]

[00:27:55.00]

NELL BLAINE: Yeah.

[00:27:55.82]

DOROTHY SECKLER: And he had decided on that. But I was able to stay in a nice place anyway, and do a little sketching and so on. So it was—and I—

[00:28:03.50]

NELL BLAINE: In Hydra.

[00:28:03.83]

DOROTHY SECKLER: I only had a short time. Yes. It was beautiful that time of the year. I know that in the middle of the summer, it's impossible, but it's very beautiful.

[00:28:11.60]

NELL BLAINE: Well, I arrived in Delphi in March. And stayed—have you seen that studio there up on the—

[00:28:17.42]

DOROTHY SECKLER: No, I didn't see the studio.

[00:28:18.30]

NELL BLAINE: —on the mountain.

[00:28:19.31]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Which—where is that located? In the town itself?

[00:28:21.62]

NELL BLAINE: It's just above the town. It's the biggest building overlooking the town of Delphi. It's between the town and the museum, but higher than the museum. It looks over the museum and the whole valley, the whole Gulf of Corinth, everything spreads out.

[00:28:37.79]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Did it have a very strange sculpture outside?

[00:28:40.61]

NELL BLAINE: Well, there wasn't any sculpture there. No.

[00:28:42.98]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Then I'm not sure I know which building.

[00:28:44.39]

NELL BLAINE: It's a great big building, and I gather the partisans were there during the war. And the building was barren of furniture when I was there. And they were very poor, because they said that it had been stripped and used for all these—

[00:29:00.95]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Were you able to work well there?

[00:29:02.69]

NELL BLAINE: Yes. I was freezing cold. And I would have to put a—you know, the snow was still on the mountains, and even though the poppies were blooming in the fields, and I'd have to put coats on, and gloves. And I could see my breath in there. It was like a prison in a way, because it was marble floors, and every sound—there weren't many painters there, about three of us in this whole big building. [Cross talk.] And they would clang the door and

it would sound like a prison door. This echo goes through the thing. But there was a great porch on the front. And I would paint there when the wind wasn't hard. It was a real stormy period there.

[00:29:40.61]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, Delphi is a very awesome place [inaudible].

[00:29:42.89]

NELL BLAINE: Well it's supposed to be a storm center just like Mykonos. And I picked the two storm centers of Greece.

[00:29:48.17]

DOROTHY SECKLER: It was storming when I came down Mount Parnassus, and believe me, I wasn't at all sure we were going to get down.

[00:29:54.57]

NELL BLAINE: Well, the skies, though, were extraordinarily dramatic.

[00:29:57.84]

DOROTHY SECKLER: And double rainbows.

[00:29:59.37]

NELL BLAINE: Yes. Well, I did landscape there a lot. And then interiors to try to warm up, you know. I bought the fabrics from those shops and tried to dress the room up.

[00:30:11.61]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Oh. [Laughs.]

[00:30:12.00]

NELL BLAINE: And then I had arranged to go to Mykonos after that. So I took the boat to Mykonos and stayed there five and a half months. I intended to stay only a month, and I just stayed on because I was painting.

[00:30:23.30]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Now what part of the year was this? Did you—

[00:30:25.47]

NELL BLAINE: Well, I arrived in Mykonos in May—

[00:30:28.05]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Oh, that must have been—

[00:30:28.17]

NELL BLAINE: —and stayed right until the end, when they flew me off.

[00:30:33.12]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Now this is where something awful happened. I don't know, just tell it.

[00:30:37.30]

NELL BLAINE: Yeah, well it was very dramatic and it's not painful to talk about. It was very exciting in one way because I had had a very good period of work. And I had made a few friends locally there, a wonderful woman named Vienoula. Did you ever go there and meet?

[00:30:55.73]



DOROTHY SECKLER: I went there and Kaldis had given me a number of names of people. But I really didn't have long enough time to look them up. And I intended to go back but I never got back, because people thought it was too far away at the time of the—I was getting ready to fly back, and afraid the boats wouldn't run, or something.

[00:31:15.44]

NELL BLAINE: Yeah. Well, I had first the government studio and then my time there was up. And I found a wonderful house called the Stupa House that a friend who ran the hotel bar there, called The Parlous, an American boy—his name was Bob Dunne—and I mention it, because he sort of saved my life in this whole episode. And I was painting in this house that he had rented. And he'd give me the whole big room with a marvelous studio with arches, and the view of Delos out the window, and the whole town below, and the great patio and porch. The whole thing was just wonderful. And I really had never had it so good, you know? And I was just winding up the spell of painting.

But suddenly I'd had a great success there. He would—there was an article in *ARTnews* on me at that time. It had just come out. And he would put it on the bar, and people would come from their yachts, and make a beeline for my studio. So I had appointments with people in the morning, showing them paintings. And I sold a number of pictures there, people like Helen Hayes, and so on. It was really amazing. And he became a very good friend. And I had an arrangement with him in exchange for a painting, that I got my meals and the use of this room. And I also had another room with this weaver, the local weaver. But anyhow, I was feeling very tired. Just a terrible fatigue was coming over me, and I thought it was psychological. That here I had everything I wanted, this beautiful studio and was painting well. But I was just so tired, I couldn't work.

[00:32:59.85]

So I got an idea to hire a boat to go to a little island, just sort of break it. And as I jumped off the boat, my legs sort of gave away. And I thought I'm really just getting old, I guess. [Laughs.] So I kept sort of pushing. And I went back to the studio and I painted a very peculiar thing, which I've never done. I had a photograph in a newspaper of an athlete, who had slumped from exhaustion after a race. Another athlete was carrying him. And I sort of made him watercolor in blues. But I remember I could hardly do it. And that was the last painting I did. And then I sort of collapsed. And I was sort of just—I could barely walk.

[00:33:39.90]

And then my friend thought something was seriously wrong. So we got the local doctor. And he diagnosed it as the grippe. And then I got a second doctor and that was diagnosed the same. So, then—but I couldn't walk. And other functions were stopping. And I had terrible back aches. So the hotel owner and another friend named Marshall Clements—[Dorothy sneezes]—they started—that they were looking for another doctor. And they found a German tourist doctor, who immediately ran a stick up my leg and decided I had polio, but didn't tell me. I didn't know a thing. And they tried to get a plane, and they got a stretcher. And they were in touch with all sorts of people. In fact, even Tom Hess was involved. He apparently was in Greece on a yacht and told some Army officer, a General, to do things for me, you know, look after me. So everybody sort of got into the act, and all behind my back without my knowing, you know, were calling embassies.

[00:34:43.16]

DOROTHY SECKLER: But you still didn't know that it was polio?

[00:34:44.73]

NELL BLAINE: I didn't know anything. I just thought I was weak from a cold or something. Because I didn't have a very high temperature, about 101. So anyhow, they got through the embassy, a seaplane. And they had taken me down on a stretcher. And I was in right there in the front by the dock. And the seaplane couldn't land, it's so rough. So then they were in the phone booth. And I didn't know what was going on. I didn't know what all the fuss was about, anyway. So they finally got a helicopter. But I understand they went to great extremes, you know, to get it from Gibraltar or something. And then when the plane landed, apparently the pilot didn't want to take me. And there was a Greek woman who is now married to this boy, who just broke into tears and had hysterics and said, "You've got to take

her." And I really didn't know this either.

[00:35:41.23]

DOROTHY SECKLER: He thought you would be catching or something.

[00:35:43.15]

NELL BLAINE: No. He said unless the Greek doctor signed the papers, "We don't take this lady. She's got a cold or something," you know? And even though they had gotten him there. So if she hadn't been hysterical, apparently they would have forgotten about it. But anyway, they got me to the U.S. Army hospital, where there was a doctor who knew about polio.

[00:36:05.74]

DOROTHY SECKLER: In Athens.

[00:36:06.16]

NELL BLAINE: Yes. If they had sent me to a Greek hospital, I would have died. And apparently I was blue when I arrived, and couldn't breathe at all. But didn't know it. I was really quite saved from all the agony of fear, because I wasn't aware of the seriousness. And the hotel owner got in the plane and came with me, and stayed with me in the hospital for 17 days, and wrote letters to my relatives, called everybody, and was extraordinary. That's why I mention it, because he was a man who didn't like to write letters and I thought was snobbish before. And he stayed with me and took complete responsibility.

[00:36:40.85]

DOROTHY SECKLER: This was this American chap named Lewis?

[00:36:43.24]

NELL BLAINE: Robert, Bob Dunne.

[00:36:45.01]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Dunne. Yeah.

[00:36:47.26]

NELL BLAINE: And then other friends came. A painter named Dorothy Andrews was there. And in fact, the plane had landed, on not an airstrip, but on the racetrack. And they were in the middle of moving the hospital from one place to another. And they also didn't have an iron lung. So there were all kinds of confusions. And I had hallucinations. So at this point, things that I say may not make any sense, because I don't remember clearly. [Audio cuts out.]

[00:37:18.18]

DOROTHY SECKLER: How long were you in the Army hospital in Athens?

[00:37:21.84]

NELL BLAINE: Seventeen days. And then they flew me, the MAT Air Service assigned seven people to my case. And they gave me long lectures in advance to calm me down, because I could only breathe 40 seconds, a very, very short time. So that they had to be very quick in transferring me from one iron lung to another. By this time they had gotten an iron lung. And so they had to put me in a very small one, which they bolted to the floor of the plane. So the seven people were three technicians, two nurses, and a doctor, just for me. So that's the way the Army does it. I had no idea of this kind of organization, and really the most wonderful people. They were so confident, and reassuring, and professional. And it was a hospital plane. The insides were bare and just stretcher cases and things like that, hammocks.

[00:38:18.55]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Were there were there soldiers being shipped home?

[00:38:20.89]

NELL BLAINE: Yes. Whoever—apparently any American citizen who is caught in this way can take advantage. That's a dramatic—

[00:38:27.88]

DOROTHY SECKLER: That encourages me in my dream of going to live in Greece. [Laughs.]

[00:38:31.54]

NELL BLAINE: Well, the American hospital really saved my life, because there were a number of nurses there who had polio experience. And the Greeks did not know about polio. Apparently they're just not versed in it for some reason.

[00:38:43.72]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Were there conditions on Mykonos that had caused the polio? I mean, I don't know. It's probably mysterious.

[00:38:50.08]

NELL BLAINE: There are sanitation problems there. And at the time that I [cross talk]—at the time that I got sick, apparently the water had gone bad, and the wells were going bad. But I had been careful, so I really can't prove what happened. Could have been a swim in the ocean with dirty water. I didn't do it often, but it could have been.

[00:39:11.55]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Why? Is the water polluted around Mykonos?

[00:39:13.71]

NELL BLAINE: It could have been. It could have been. I think, some pipes may go into certain areas. Or it could have been the well water.

[00:39:25.37]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Then when you got back, what happened? You came back to New York.

[00:39:28.97]

NELL BLAINE: I was shipped first to Wiesbaden for three days to make use of that good iron lung, and then shipped again with the same seven people to Mount Sinai, where I was eight months in the hospital, just kind of living in the hospital, getting therapy and so on. And it took three months for them to be sure I would live, because apparently all the functions had gone, you know. And I was completely paralyzed for several months, almost completely. I could move one hand, and one arm a bit, and my head a little bit, but otherwise nothing. And I had to be fed, of course, with a spoon. But gradually, I was able to breathe five minutes one day, 10 minutes the next, and then finally an hour. And then gradually, I could breathe. And I regained half of my diaphragm. So I function with half a diaphragm.

[00:40:24.71]

DOROTHY SECKLER: You're doing obviously well.

[00:40:26.40]

NELL BLAINE: Well, I'm a little breathless at times. [They laugh.]

[00:40:29.69]

DOROTHY SECKLER: I hadn't even noticed it. But I suppose, of course, this was how much of your life gone when you didn't paint at all?

[00:40:37.34]

NELL BLAINE: Well, it was a over a year. I did try to draw in the hospital fairly quickly, in fact after two months, I tried to draw. And I was sure I could do it, even though they didn't think so. [Laughs.]

[00:40:49.55]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Could you?

[00:40:51.29]

NELL BLAINE: Uh—my hand shook badly, and I couldn't control it, so I had to start with my left hand. My right hand didn't work at all. And I couldn't—my thumb didn't work on my right hand. And of course, I'd always been right-handed. So that was a rather frightening problem. But the doctor talked me into an operation on my thumb, which is a transplant. And they steal a muscle from one finger and tie it into your thumb. And it was successful to the point where I can hold a pen and pencil now in the right hand. But I can't lift my right arm, so I had to teach myself to paint with the left. So I transfer, when I do watercolors on my lap, I can work with my right. When I paint, I can paint with my left.

[00:41:32.58]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Isn't that interesting?

[00:41:33.55]

NELL BLAINE: So I just had to do it. It took another year to really begin to be a little adaptable at that, adept.

[00:41:42.87]

DOROTHY SECKLER: And where were you as you were recovering in New York? Were you—you weren't able to go back to your loft or anything like that, of course?

[00:41:51.43]

NELL BLAINE: No. No. I moved directly from the hospital to this apartment and set it up. And this had tables—

[00:41:59.60]

DOROTHY SECKLER: The apartment, of course, for the sake of the record, is 210 Riverside Drive, at the corner of 93rd, and on the eighth floor. And it—well, what did you want—how can—you were telling me how you said about that's the important—

[00:42:12.19]

NELL BLAINE: Well, I had to set up tables a particular height that I could just roll into with the wheelchair, and everything as much as possible within reach, because my reach was very limited. And so that meant a lot of remodeling. And the kitchen also was set up with a stove that I could roll under, a thin stove, a few inches thick.

[00:42:36.94]

DOROTHY SECKLER: How about painting? Do you do you work on an easel, or how?

[00:42:41.26]

NELL BLAINE: I work on an easel, just as before. Just an easel that the legs are far enough apart that the chair can go under. And I plan to get to bigger paintings with brush extensions, and things of that sort. But so far, I've really limited myself to smaller sizes.

[00:42:59.11]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, what do you mean by small?

[00:43:01.12]

NELL BLAINE: Well, 40 inches is a nice size.

[00:43:04.24]

DOROTHY SECKLER: [Laughs] That looks so small [ph].

[00:43:08.65]

NELL BLAINE: But I do tend to work a little more compactly than before.

[00:43:12.32]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Than you used to.

[00:43:12.47]

NELL BLAINE: And also, I think the forms are simpler. There has been a change in the painting.

[00:43:19.10]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Has it been related to the physical manipulation, or to other ideas?

[00:43:25.16]

NELL BLAINE: I think both. I think one adapts to all sorts of things. [Cross talk.] And no doubt there were psychological things that really came into it. I felt that I had to make certain things count more quickly, perhaps. The spontaneity was maybe greater, and simplified forms. Well, it's hard to talk about your own work.

[00:43:49.51]

DOROTHY SECKLER: It is. Of course, the color of your painting, as far as I've followed it, since you were in Poindexter has always been a very joyous kind of color, and vibrant and light-saturated. This apparently did not change. Did it? I mean was there a change, an interlude, when anything—

[00:44:14.33]

NELL BLAINE: I don't think it changed tremendously. No.

[00:44:16.69]

DOROTHY SECKLER: You would perhaps need it even more in terms of—

[00:44:20.11]

NELL BLAINE: Maybe it increased. Maybe it increased.

[00:44:25.15]

DOROTHY SECKLER: You've never worked with a sense of the ordinary [ph], never. Because I hadn't seen your earlier work. But your palette had—I don't recall at a time when it had been, in any sense, you know, cool, quiet, somber, gloomy, or dark in any way. It's always—

[00:44:46.42]

NELL BLAINE: In the middle '50s, it probably was quieter than any period before or after.

[00:44:51.47]

DOROTHY SECKLER: And even there—

[00:44:51.91]

NELL BLAINE: Because the early abstractions were primary colors almost, and very bright. And then it became bright again.

[00:45:00.31]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Was there any different sense as you came back to work, of the way

you related to—first of all you seem to have maintained your interest in landscape, primarily.

[00:45:12.83]

NELL BLAINE: Well, I think I'm just as interested in interiors. And I now I'm more interested in the figure and portraits—

[00:45:19.13]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Really? That's interesting—

[00:45:19.92]

NELL BLAINE: —which is really far back. It's making a bigger cycle. [Cross talk.]

[00:45:24.98]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Here you have some company, of course. But for a long while, there weren't many people doing landscapes at the time when you were. I mean Wolf Kahn and oh, half dozen other people, maybe [inaudible].

[00:45:43.61]

NELL BLAINE: Well, Hyde Solomon—

[00:45:44.84]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Hyde Solomon, yeah.

[00:45:45.11]

NELL BLAINE: But he worked almost entirely from imagination, studio landscape, and just occasionally drawing from nature.

[00:45:54.17]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, there had been a few people. Of course, there was a kind of thing that happened after the Bonnard show in Chicago, I believe, where there was a kind of a wave of a slight Renaissance, at least in landscape painting.

[00:46:08.87]

NELL BLAINE: There should be more Bonnard shows. [They laugh.]

[00:46:15.14]

DOROTHY SECKLER: No, I feel the same way. But when you came back, then your subject matter did include some still life. I mean anything about still life in particular, any way you go about doing it?

[00:46:31.59]

NELL BLAINE: Well, I set up very carefully.

[00:46:33.71]

DOROTHY SECKLER: You do?

[00:46:34.70]

NELL BLAINE: For a still life, yes. And make kind of relationships with the forms as before I start. It's kind of rhythmic placement of objects.

[00:46:44.36]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:46:45.47]

NELL BLAINE: And a few simple objects. And I often work them over and over. Do one still life many times, or a vase of flowers as they die, in various states of decomposition.

[00:46:59.12]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And it really does change what you're doing, that the appearance of the thing changes. You're not inventing it as in the old days when you would decide, well, you know, I might as well.

[00:47:12.68]

NELL BLAINE: Oh, I take many liberties with the color and so on. It's still somewhat abstract. But I really want to get some essence of what's there. I really feel that's a kind of honesty now that I like.

[00:47:29.62]

DOROTHY SECKLER: How would you go about—

[00:47:33.18]

[Interruption] I didn't do much. I'm watching my tape.

[00:47:38.97]

In proceeding, do you still work on the white canvas, or do you tend to block in large areas of color [inaudible]?

[00:47:45.75]

NELL BLAINE: I always work on the white canvas with a certain amount of calligraphy first. Feeling around with—

[00:47:51.83]

DOROTHY SECKLER: In color, or—

[00:47:52.65]

NELL BLAINE: In color. In color. I never draw with black or draw with charcoal. that's something I never do.

[00:47:58.92]

DOROTHY SECKLER: So you still—

[00:47:59.61]

NELL BLAINE: Colored lines.

[END OF TRACK AAA\_blaine67\_8401\_m.]

[00:00:05.85]

DOROTHY SECKLER: This is Dorothy Seckler, testing the machine in preparation for continuing the transference of a tape on the artist Nell Blaine. [Recorder stops, restarts.] This is Dorothy Seckler, resuming the transcription of a tape on an interview with the artist Nell Blaine.

[00:00:32.14]

[Recorder stops, restarts.]

[From [00:00:32] to [00:02:17], approximately the last two minutes of "TRACK AAA\_blaine67\_8401\_m" repeats. -Ed.]

[00:02:18.00]

NELL BLAINE: Yeah.

[00:02:19.05]

DOROTHY SECKLER: And making large divisions and then working more and more solid patches or areas?

[00:02:25.02]

NELL BLAINE: Yeah. But it's fairly linear, but not drawing lines around the form.

[00:02:29.52]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:02:30.06]

NELL BLAINE: But just sort of placements are linear.

[00:02:32.61]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:02:33.93]

NELL BLAINE: Sort of a rippling line.

[00:02:35.49]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yeah. And how long do you tend to work over a painting?

[00:02:44.49]

NELL BLAINE: Usually, not very long. I would say three or four days on a larger painting, and one sitting and two sittings on a smaller one, quite frequently. [Audio cuts out.] I build up to a lot of excitement and then work very fast.

[00:03:01.04]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:03:01.86]

NELL BLAINE: And I've been doing things—when I went to St. Lucia, I tended to do fish, and things that would decompose so fast, I had to—

[00:03:11.12]

DOROTHY SECKLER: There's a—I want to get that in, too—not that this means that we're finishing our tape. But I know that this has been an interesting thing—that was in 1965. You went to—that's in the West Indies—

[00:03:28.05]

NELL BLAINE: Yes. Well, first I went to England. I had met a nurse in the hospital in Mount Sinai. It was an English nurse. And she had a visa problem. And she had to go back to England, and then sign a paper that she wouldn't reenter the United States for two years for purposes of working. And her specialty had been polio nursing. Well, she was interested in painting, and wanted to come and help set me up to paint and was quite interested in my situation. And I thought I could perhaps, you know, be a teacher as well, and help her with her painting. So we'd have some sort of exchange. Well, she came back and stayed with me for four years and was very helpful, and also modeled for me and learned how to sort of walk me around, and would take me into the woods, or something. And she was very athletic and could handle a chair very well. So we made several trips, one, again, to Yaddo, before going to England.

[00:04:26.79]



DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:04:27.37]

NELL BLAINE: And we found that in order for her to be able to stay, we would just have to go and live on English soil. So the friends raised money. And we had quite a marvelous trip and lived in Dorset, her friend's house, in a little town named Burton-Bradstock. And there we had a very big garden with coots and ducks on a mill stream. And it was just idyllic. And this friend was a poet, named Howard Griffin. He just turned over his house to us. And so I did a lot of painting there that summer, and then went on to St. Lucia, where we spent 11 months in the middle of the island in a very primitive area. And we had a lot of privations there. Mrs. Poindexter was generous enough to build a house for us to my specifications.

[00:05:16.69]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Really? Oh, marvelous.

[00:05:18.07]

NELL BLAINE: And it was built on a mountainside. But the labor problem was such that it took months for us to get a road up there. So I was sort of pinned up on the mountain side. But it was a beautiful spot, all the same. But we, for a long time, didn't have proper water or furniture and things like that. But the house itself was lovely. And we had a very sweet boy. And his mother was our maid. And the young boy—

[00:05:45.49]

DOROTHY SECKLER: I think they're on you're—the back of this [catalog -Ed.]

[00:05:48.82]

NELL BLAINE: That's right. There are pictures of them there.

[00:05:50.59]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yeah, I remember seeing that.

[00:05:51.49]

NELL BLAINE: Leonard. And I sort of became his second mother. I wanted to adopt him, the 15-year-old boy. He's with me in that picture.

[00:05:59.38]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, you have all these fruits, and—

[00:06:01.96]

NELL BLAINE: Those are shells. I became a shell collector in St. Lucia.

[00:06:05.62]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Oh.

[00:06:05.95]

NELL BLAINE: And I, at first, was interested in them as beautiful objects, sculpturally.

[00:06:09.76]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:06:10.15]

NELL BLAINE: And then I became interested in identifying them. And I started a shell book. I was making drawings of shells. And that was kind of my hobby. And this boy would find them for me. And then we got fishermen looking and diving for them.

[00:06:25.16]

DOROTHY SECKLER: So how close were you to the sea?

[00:06:27.19]

NELL BLAINE: Well, I could see the sea. It was a 10-minute walk down to the sea. But then the road was rough. And it grew up a great deal. And there were snakes. The fer-de-lance was all through the valley, and it's a very deadly viper. Plus, we had scorpions, and tarantulas, and other insects, centipedes, whatnot. And it was just really a wild place. And this was one of the real—the Natives called it "Font des Serpent." It was really the fountain serpent.

[00:06:59.43]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

[00:07:00.39]

NELL BLAINE: And there were—we had to treat several snake bites there. We had a number of kits.

[00:07:05.28]

DOROTHY SECKLER: You mean you? Or your own—

[00:07:06.36]

NELL BLAINE: Well, my nurse, who was with me, luckily, saved a man's life there. And she—we set up a little school. I taught grammar and painting to a few of the Natives. And she was nursing them constantly. You just couldn't not do it. When I found out that Leonard, at 15, had never heard of Africa, that's what got me started.

[00:07:28.59]

DOROTHY SECKLER: I can imagine. Are you thinking of going back at all?

[00:07:32.50]

NELL BLAINE: Well, it was very difficult, technically, just for me to get off the island.

[00:07:36.55]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:07:37.00]

NELL BLAINE: We found that the ships wouldn't take me. And the planes, we had many times to cancel the plane. And we didn't have a phone, or a car. So if I went back, it would be a little different set of circumstances.

[00:07:52.54]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm. Were you able to do much painting there?

[00:07:54.49]

NELL BLAINE: After we got the road and the workmen retired, I was able to work very well.

[00:07:59.35]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:07:59.92]

NELL BLAINE: But then the heat came. In the middle of the day, it was really deadly hot—and the rainy season. And I worked out on the porch. And then the rain would come so suddenly. And sometimes ten rains in a day. And there was just this terrible downpour. And

we had landslides, all kinds of dramas, one after the other. And hurricane scares and all sorts of things like that.

[00:08:25.81]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Was there a village—

[00:08:26.80]

NELL BLAINE: We had floods.

[00:08:27.40]

DOROTHY SECKLER: —that you were near?

[00:08:28.09]

NELL BLAINE: The nearest village was a completely primitive village, and was a few miles away, called Anse La Raye. And this village was full of stagnant water. And the disease of bilharzia was very virulent there. And it was just a fishing village. And the people were also so full of this disease, they didn't have much energy for fishing, even. And they lived in tiny shacks sitting up on the round stones, just balanced on stones, and just a few feet apart, each shack. And they really were so tiny. I visited one. They took me in. I practically took up the whole room—and just one table, and one chair, and a radio. They all have a radio.

[00:09:15.02]

DOROTHY SECKLER: How did you—

[00:09:15.50]

NELL BLAINE: You can't imagine how—

[00:09:16.25]

DOROTHY SECKLER: —choose to build a house in such a place?

[00:09:19.10]

NELL BLAINE: Well, Mrs. Poindexter and friends of hers have a 450-acre banana plantation. And it was British at the time, and it would have been fine for Dilys's visa problem.

[00:09:32.44]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. I see. Yeah.

[00:09:34.11]

NELL BLAINE: So it was just a coincidence that these two things are coincided.

[00:09:38.54]

DOROTHY SECKLER: But nonetheless, you brought back a good crop of paintings. [Laughs]

[00:09:42.47]

NELL BLAINE: Well, I managed—

[00:09:43.14]

DOROTHY SECKLER: And shells.

[00:09:44.90]

NELL BLAINE: And shells. I have thousands of shells.

[00:09:48.92]

DOROTHY SECKLER: And how has work been going? You've been working with the figure

now. Tell me about that. How did you get involved with the figure?

[00:09:55.64]

NELL BLAINE: Well, I've always been interested in painting the figure. But I have gotten more interested in portraits lately. I've never done them to my satisfaction. But it's just—suddenly, it seems terribly exciting to give a face that's alive, that is a kind of a permanent image of this person, some life coming from it. I find most portraiture of today very dull, except for Giacometti, and a few other people. But to really give it life—

[00:10:27.41]

DOROTHY SECKLER: I hope you show me one or two before I leave. I'd like to see them.

[00:10:31.64]

NELL BLAINE: Well, I don't have my best ones here, unfortunately.

[00:10:33.98]

DOROTHY SECKLER: [Laughs]

[00:10:34.46]

NELL BLAINE: They always get trundled out so fast.

[00:10:37.01]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yeah. They do get—are they commissioned, to some extent?

[00:10:40.91]

NELL BLAINE: No, I haven't—I never can function with commission very well. I won't say never. But it just doesn't appeal.

[00:10:46.88]

DOROTHY SECKLER: What kinds of people have you painted?

[00:10:48.71]

NELL BLAINE: Mostly, I paint friends, people I know very well. And I like to paint them over and over—

[00:10:53.17]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:10:53.57]

NELL BLAINE: —and keep on sort of penetrating. [Audio cuts out.] And I don't think I could work under a commission basis very well.

[00:11:06.44]

DOROTHY SECKLER: It would impose a completely different kind of feeling.

[00:11:08.92]

NELL BLAINE: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. I just like to know the person very well and have a feeling to paint them first. If they say, "Okay, I'll buy it," that's fine.

[00:11:19.52]

DOROTHY SECKLER: [Laughs.] Has your color changed in the handling of the figure?

[00:11:25.73]

NELL BLAINE: Not, I don't think, a great deal. I mean, of course, there's more flesh color.

[They laugh.] But the same problem of luminosity still attracts me.

[00:11:36.07]

DOROTHY SECKLER: And posing your figure, how do you pose it? I mean, do you pose it with a good bit of light concentrated on it, or—

[00:11:42.46]

NELL BLAINE: Yes. I use—I paint a great deal at night and use electric light.

[00:11:47.53]

DOROTHY SECKLER: You do?

[00:11:47.62]

NELL BLAINE: And I have very strong lamps that I turn on for myself. And then I put the light directly on the figure too.

[00:11:54.85]

DOROTHY SECKLER: That's interesting that you can do that. Somehow or other, your work always seems so much associated with daylight. It's really actually because of light you get the—

[00:12:04.23]

NELL BLAINE: Well, I want that feeling. But I don't work with it very often. Except when I do landscape, of course, I do.

[00:12:08.26]

DOROTHY SECKLER: What would happen—I mean, why is it better to use artificial light than real sunlight, what you can use?

[00:12:17.23]

NELL BLAINE: Well, to tell you the truth, it hasn't got to do with the light so much as the peace of mind I get at night. I don't have interruptions. I can work late.

[00:12:25.78]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yeah.

[00:12:26.32]

NELL BLAINE: And I feel a very quiet time. So it has more to do with that than any sort of light consideration. And I found very often that other people have the same thing. You know, Picasso, they say, would work well into the night. It's just the feeling of privacy that I really demand. I don't like people milling around, [laughs] and phone interruptions. So then I know I can just keep going until I drop.

[00:12:56.67]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

[00:12:56.98]

NELL BLAINE: I work until I'm exhausted.

[00:12:59.77]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Do you often work into the middle of the night?

[00:13:01.63]

NELL BLAINE: Right. Yes.

[00:13:02.95]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Then, of course, however, you can sleep late the next day, of course.

[00:13:06.41]

NELL BLAINE: That's the one fortunate thing. [They laugh.] So my hours are very bohemian.

[00:13:11.23]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:13:11.95]

NELL BLAINE: Yeah—and difficult.

[00:13:17.61]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Sort of looking back and summarizing the general, you know, this whole—what would you call it—well, anyway, a development from initial abstraction at a time when it was very daring to be abstract and then gradually recovering nature at a series of different stages, does this—Well, is there anything particular you'd like to say about it or that you think about, in terms of the future? How does the art scene itself affect you right now? Do you feel—

[00:14:03.36]

NELL BLAINE: Well, I have some negative feeling about some of the things that are going on. But then, I guess, I always have. And at the time when I was working abstractly, it seemed so new, and fresh, and exciting to me and to my experience. And I cannot find that as exciting now. It's partly just because I've been through it in a certain way. And I can't go back to it. And working figuratively seems more exciting and new to me. [Audio cuts out.] —the basis of my own experience.

[00:14:36.71]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:14:37.24]

NELL BLAINE: And I've always been anti-programmatic. I've never liked theory. I never have been able to find that real. And I'm not too excited about much abstraction now—

[00:14:54.82]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, how do you feel about the—

[00:14:55.00]

NELL BLAINE: —and that's just based on my own subjective experience.

[00:15:00.85]

DOROTHY SECKLER: For instance, then the color field painting doesn't particularly appeal to you, or that sort of thing?

[00:15:08.56]

NELL BLAINE: It doesn't seem to nourish me, and that's why I can't get too interested. Of course, there are usually exceptions in any direction. There's always some outstanding person who does something so well that it's exciting to see it. But then no one really nourishes me too much in the other—

[00:15:27.91]

DOROTHY SECKLER: And obviously, you don't seem to have been much affected [laughs], I gather, by either Pop or Op. [Laughs.] I can't imagine.

[00:15:36.16]

NELL BLAINE: No, I just can't get excited about it really at all.

[00:15:42.10]

DOROTHY SECKLER: But it hasn't, in any way, bothered—I mean, it doesn't bother you, apparently. The changing art scene hasn't.

[00:15:49.79]

NELL BLAINE: No, I mean, one should be open to all kinds of change, and enjoy it. But I feel that some of it is purely based on commercial ambition.

[00:15:59.08]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:15:59.56]

NELL BLAINE: And that does disturb me, to a certain extent. I mean, I feel that a lot of it is of a kind of literary base and also somewhat academic, and under the guise of being avant-garde. And I think people will always go on being fooled by that.

[00:16:18.43]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:16:19.27]

NELL BLAINE: But of course, there are exceptions, always.

[00:16:23.80]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, in any case, you have a good bit of company of people who are interested in working with the figure today.

[00:16:31.78]

NELL BLAINE: It seems like a small rank to me.

[00:16:34.03]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Does it really?

[00:16:34.78]

NELL BLAINE: Yeah, it does. But a few good people—

[00:16:37.67]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, I don't. I seem to see the figure.

[00:16:39.46]

NELL BLAINE: You feel it's emerging more?

[00:16:41.63]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, I think it's pervasive. You know, I'm still—

[00:16:44.71]

NELL BLAINE: Really? That's very cheering. I really am glad to hear that.

[00:16:47.97]

DOROTHY SECKLER: —doing large amounts of landscape, myself. And I feel like, you know, I must be antediluvian to still be bothering around with landscape, and everybody's doing

figures, you know?

[00:16:57.39]

NELL BLAINE: Oh, I think they're one and the same, in a way. I really—it's just a different subject.

[00:17:02.10]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, a good many of the people that are doing the figure, though, have—there seems to be a kind of a credo or position involved in it. It's as if the figure is really like more of a—I suppose, more explicitly a rebellion against Abstract Expressionism, and abstraction, in general, that you can sort of make your position more clear. And then you take someone who goes to the extreme, like Walt Perlstein, for instance, where, you know, there's such an explicitness to the figure—[laughs]

[00:17:47.65]

NELL BLAINE: Yeah.

[00:17:47.79]

DOROTHY SECKLER: —that it hasn't had in most painting up until now, so that the last vestiges of the open shapes and the abstracting seem to have been eliminated. Although, no doubt, one could still find it there, to some extent. But the will exists in a number of artists, it would seem, to do the figure in such a way that it is the figure. [Laughs.]

[00:18:21.31]

NELL BLAINE: Yeah.

[00:18:21.97]

DOROTHY SECKLER: —more specifically.

[00:18:22.35]

NELL BLAINE: Well, I don't feel close to that at all, because I don't like the idea of closing down to any fixed position.

[00:18:29.12]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:18:30.76]

NELL BLAINE: I don't like it in abstraction; I don't like it in relation to the figure. I think things should be left more open. And so much criticism tends to close the doors behind—Now we've come to this, so, therefore, we must proceed to this position.

[00:18:43.34]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yeah.

[00:18:43.88]

NELL BLAINE: And I find, absolutely, an anti-creative atmosphere is created by that. It's just stifling.

[00:18:51.98]

DOROTHY SECKLER: [Laughs.]

[00:18:54.05]

NELL BLAINE: So I try not to pay too much attention to these restrictions. They really seem to want to lay down the law and say we must proceed in this direction now that we've come to this point.



[00:19:06.29]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yeah, now that the critics have found out— [Cross talk.] [Laughs.]

[00:19:10.80]

NELL BLAINE: They feel very secure. But I don't. I feel that you're always full of doubt. From one day to the next, I couldn't imagine saying that this is what I must do.

[00:19:22.11]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes, leaving those doors ajar seems to be a pretty good idea. [Laughs.]

[00:19:26.55]

NELL BLAINE: Hard to do, yeah.

[00:19:28.20]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Hard sometimes, but necessary.

[00:19:30.33]

NELL BLAINE: Yeah.

[00:19:31.56]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Have you any immediate plans, or projects, or commissions, or anything that we might get into the record at this point? I'm still hoping that we'll do another tape, perhaps, next year. It isn't that I want to close it. But I mean, anything in this year of '67 that you're thinking about?

[00:19:50.76]

NELL BLAINE: Well, I hope to do a sketchbook that will be reproduced facsimile, because I've, from time to time, have just made them for my friends. And it's sort of a natural expression to me. And so Leslie Katz said that he wants to reproduce one.

[00:20:08.34]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Oh, how nice.

[00:20:08.80]

NELL BLAINE: So I'm kind of excited about that.

[00:20:10.78]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Great.

[00:20:12.19]

NELL BLAINE: And of course, it's not a reality until I do it. I shouldn't speak of it yet.

[00:20:16.63]

DOROTHY SECKLER: But you have some of the sketches? Or you're going to start—

[00:20:19.78]

NELL BLAINE: Well, I've done a number of sketchbooks. And whether I will start from scratch, we are making up dummies. And I'll just work on each one so that we can take one and do a facsimile, the best one.

[00:20:31.30]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:20:31.60]

NELL BLAINE: But we may interpose one other sketch from another book, and try to get the best group. So in that way, it won't be truly facsimile.

[00:20:41.77]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, how will this be reproduced? Is it black and white, or in color—

[00:20:44.16]

NELL BLAINE: It will be done—it will be mostly black and white with some touches of color by hand.

[00:20:49.33]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:20:52.62]

NELL BLAINE: And it will be done by [inaudible] offset. But it sounds like he intends to do a lovely job on it. He's doing beautiful books now.

[00:21:02.44]

DOROTHY SECKLER: He has a good feeling for that sort of thing. And he knows, and has a good eye, I'm sure. There's something else I—oh, yes, is there anything we ought to put in the record? I'm sure that during these years your work has entered certain collections that we probably should get in. Is there anything particularly you'd like to mention?

[00:21:25.49]

NELL BLAINE: Well, there are a few museums—the Whitney—

[00:21:29.14]

DOROTHY SECKLER: [Inaudible]

[00:21:30.13]

NELL BLAINE: You don't mean those? [Cross talk.] Oh, you mean particular collections like—

[00:21:33.00]

DOROTHY SECKLER: [Inaudible] yes, the Whitney, and—

[00:21:34.15]

NELL BLAINE: Yes, and the Virginia Museum and—oh, I think they're all listed there.

[00:21:39.70]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Oh, are they?

[00:21:41.08]

NELL BLAINE: They should be.

[00:21:41.74]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Maybe we needn't do that then.

[00:21:43.57]

NELL BLAINE: Yeah. And Hirshhorn has a number, and Knoedler's.

[00:21:51.08]

DOROTHY SECKLER: And are you continuing your tie now with Poindexter?

[00:21:58.52]

NELL BLAINE: Yes. Yes, I'm still with Poindexter. And I'm planning a show next year—

[00:22:02.42]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Good.

[00:22:02.75]

NELL BLAINE: —in April [laughs], if I come up with a picture.

[00:22:06.69]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Will this be largely, you think, a show of figure pieces? Or will it be a mixture of [inaudible]—

[00:22:11.57]

NELL BLAINE: I think it will be a mixture of landscape and figure painting, still life.

[00:22:18.02]

DOROTHY SECKLER: In painting landscape, there's something I meant to ask you. And this is sort of a—

[00:22:22.38]

[Interruption] I've only another half minute to tell you.

[00:22:25.13]

—Has there ever seemed to you to be some specific kind of quality that you sort of have to recognize before the subject really has sort of gelled for you in a landscape? I mean, since you apparently and naturally don't go for the obvious picturesqueness that—could you think of—is there any way of nailing—I know how elusive this sort of thing is—what it is in a landscape where something that maybe you sometimes say to yourself, oh, well, now I recognize this quality again or something like that?

[00:23:07.91]

NELL BLAINE: Well, a particular kind of scene will be more exciting to me, or I feel like something somewhat rugged at times. But just as I will paint a portrait, and do a friend over and over, I do the same with a landscape.

[00:23:23.45]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:23:24.32]

NELL BLAINE: In St. Lucia, I painted the same view a hundred times. Each time it was new, and of a different quality, a different atmosphere, according to the day. That part would be conditioned a little like Impressionism.

[00:23:37.10]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:23:37.73]

NELL BLAINE: But I was interested in just the rhythm and the twist of the land.

[00:23:44.18]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:23:45.83]

NELL BLAINE: I really can't—[laughs] I really can't meet your—

[00:23:49.43]

DOROTHY SECKLER: No, I think that that's a good point, that you do the same thing again.

[00:23:52.84]

NELL BLAINE: But I do it over and over, so I really feel I know it. I know every valley and every hill.

[00:23:58.62]

DOROTHY SECKLER: And knowing it does sort of release you to be freer with—

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]