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Oral history interview with Calvin Burnett, 1980 June 13-1981 January 6

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Transcript

Interview

RB: ROBERT BROWN
CB: CALVIN BURNETT

RB: To begin, perhaps you could talk a bit about your childhood. You were born in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1921. Do you have any particular early memories, and particularly anything that might have led eventually to your doing what you've done in your adult life?

CB: Offhand, no. I just remember one or two things that might be significant now that I look back on them. My father was interested in art and did a little bit of drawing here and there and I saw some of his things. And then my mother had painted an apple at some point in her life and had that hanging on the wall. And it seemed to be a very accurate depiction of an apple to me--and I always thought that was kind of miraculous to be able to do that sort of thing. Then I remember a little later, when I got somewhat interested in art, I would sit around on Sunday afternoon just copying the comics, Mickey Mouse and that sort of thing. And since I was the only one of the four children to do that my parents found a little, maybe about a foot square section on the kitchen sink that was covered over with some of those set tops. And they put that as my spot. And my father went out and bought a little ink holder, Higgins bottled ink holder, which I still have and cherish for just that reason. And I put that bottle in there and that was *my* ink, and *my* spot and that's where I was able to draw. So I think that kind of feeling as shown by my parents that, you know, what I was doing was not only possible but to be encouraged to some extent, may have been very significant, now that I look back on it. Had they discouraged me at that point perhaps I might have turned to another direction. Now, neither of them really wanted me to be an artist. They were pretty much discouraged by the fact that I went to art school. My father would have liked me to follow his footsteps, you know, and be some big significant, something important, you know. Rather than an artist. And they did have a tendency to think about art as something bohemians did, you know, rather than, you know, law or medicine, one of those other things.

RB: They were more straight-laced, huh?

CB: Oh, yeah.

RB: What did your father do? What was his...?

CB: He was a doctor, physician, surgeon. And he had a very difficult time financially, this was as you could see. You know, the early 30's, 1921 and 30, they were in the very poor time -- depression actually. I'm sure the country didn't really begin to prosper again until the war came along. You know '38, Hitler, you know, '40, along there. Well, he was a doctor in a very poor section of a poor city. And his clients, no, his patients, had no money. They would pay him in whatever they could get from the government, you know, in chickens and in beans and in food and that sort of thing. You know, had he been living today things would have been fine but back in those days we were very poor. And that may have been one of the reasons that none of the boys--there were three of us--wanted to follow in his footsteps. Because it was hard to convince us at the time that doctors were going to be as affluent as they are nowadays. Not that we had that ability, you know, I don't think so. I think I was just born with the ability to be an artist. But he was sort of disappointed that none of us did anything along those lines.

RB: But from your early childhood he encouraged your drawing, didn't he?

CB: Oh yeah. Un huh. And when I talk to other people and when I talk to some of my students I find that that is unusual. It seemed to be perfectly natural at the time. But now I see that it isn't very often that people encourage their children, at least, especially, when I was going to art school. Nowadays, you know, 20 or 30 years later, it is much more usual for parents to encourage their boys particularly to go into art.

RB: Un huh. Why do you think that change has come about?

CB: Oh, I think the flower children, the war. The whole change in the attitude toward artists goes along with the attitude towards gays, homosexuals, blacks, ethnics, women--it's all part of the same thing, you know. The same feeling that people can be much more individual. And things are by no means to be as separated as they used to. This is for men to do, this is for women to do. That's all part of what's going on nowadays.

RB: But would your parents put your drawings up and admire them, or at least encourage you when you were small?

CB: They just thought everything I did was great, that's all. It's like, they would give them to my grandparents

and they would have these little things on the wall when we'd go down to see them, you know. One set of grandparents lived in Springfield, you know, and go down there and there'd be my little drawings up on the wall, you know. Very encouraging, oh yeah.

RB: What sort of things did you do?

CB: As I said, just little things I copied out of the newspaper, you know, I'd sit down and draw Mickey Mouse and Krazy Kat, and Felix the Cat and that kind of thing, you know, and they just thought it was great.

RB: What about schooling, was that something you enjoyed?

CB: No, I hated school. But I did draw in school. I was the one who'd put Santa Claus on the blackboard in colored chalk. No, I did not enjoy school until I got to art school. I wasn't a bad student at all. I got good enough grades and I didn't have to really struggle too hard to get through. It wasn't a strain. It was just regimented, I guess, you know, I didn't like any of those kinds of things. I didn't like the boy scouts for instance, when I was in that. And I didn't like, I certainty didn't want to go to the war, or go to the army or anything of that sort, no. I just didn't like school because I was being told all the time to do something.

RB: Yeah, they were pretty disciplinarian then?

CB: Oh sure, oh yeah. Back in those days, yeah, very.

RB: Did you like Cambridge itself?

CB: Yes, yeah. My childhood was quite relaxed and I didn't have any -- the only thing wrong with my childhood was we never seemed to have enough money. But as far as living, we were, we lived all right. And I didn't know how poor we were until I got older.

RB: Well, by the time you were in high school were you doing some art form in school as well?

CB: Yes, but by the time I got to high school I had straightened out a bit. I was, you know, not -- I was more or less taking things as they'd come. I was somewhat rebellious, I suppose, when I was in elementary school. I'll say the sixth, seventh and eighth grades kind of thing. But when I got to high school I had another group of people that I went in, you know, boys, I hung around all boys and girls. And that group was interested in going to college. And that was a big help to me because they tended to work a bit harder. And I liked it well enough. The funny thing about art was that I had to drop art because I was getting such poor grades and that was the one thing that kept me off the honor roll and therefore might well have prevented me from getting a scholarship, so.

RB: Why do you think you did poorly in art?

CB: I thought I was a wise guy, I guess. I thought that I was too smart for the rest of them. I thought I was bet. . . . I don't know what, really. I don't really know. But we had terrible art teachers there. Now when I think about here and know how to teach art, I know that what they were doing was absolutely wrong and completely boring. They would pass out little mimeographed sheets of trees, you know, an elm tree and a maple tree, then we had to copy or trace these trees and label them. That's what art was, you see.

RB: There was no going outdoors and sketching in class or anything? Or drawing from still lifes or models or anything?

CB: As far as I can remember nothing of interest happened in art class. But I did do some things, I guess they did some poster maybe some of that sort but it wasn't anything that I was interested in.

RB: So that was actually--did you still want to do the drawing or anything like that out on the outside during your teenage years?

CB: Yes. Toward the end of high school I guess was the beginning of the WPA. And they set up an art class in the basement of a building fairly near me and the teacher's name was a Mr. Heinkemp, and he gave me

RB: Heinkemp?

CB: Heinkemp. [spelled out] H E I N K E M P, if I'm not mistaken. And he let me paint in oil paints! He got oil cloth, and hardware store canned paints, and gave me some brushes. And I still have some of those things. And I would build the paint up thick the way I'd seen on those decorative paintings, you know. And I really got interested and excited about that. Now that I mention that, I suppose I just about never used color when I was in high school except those little pans of watercolor that were always so thin and insipid. Especially when you were trying to put them on manila paper. You know, terrible! Whereas robust oil color on oil cloth really began to look like real art and I think that's really what got me going.

RB: So this is a program you were in for a year or two?

CB: Probably not more than a year and it was probably was about my junior year in high school because in my senior year I remember getting a scholarship to go to an adult education center, which used to be up on Mt. Vernon Street, in Boston. It's now down on Commonwealth Avenue. And I remember my parents driving me over there and driving me back. And there was a teacher there by the name of Brann, I think, B R A N N, and she did the kind of things you mentioned to me just a moment ago and that is setting up still life groups and drawings from ideas and that sort of thing. And that was when I was still in high school.

RB: Did you paint there, too?

CB: I don't remember whether I painted there or not. Yeah, I think I painted with tube watercolors, if I'm not mistaken, yes.

RB: So that was an improvement?

CB: Yeah both of those were close to being what I thought art should have been or was at the time.

RB: Why do you suppose then you knew what art should be? Had you gone to the museums?

CB: Oh, sure I had been to museums. And everybody knows that art is oil paintings. You know, where you see somebody's portrait, George Washington or something like that, that's real art, you see. At least that's what I thought of it as. Yes, we'd been to museums and concerts. We didn't lack for that sort of thing at all. And I had taken music lessons and dancing lessons and I was ready at that time to play in an orchestra. I'm just trying to think of when that happened. There was a WPA orchestra also. And I had been disappointed in high school. But anyway when I went to high school in Cambridge, went to the Cambridge High Latin School, it was a very large school and tended to be very impersonal. So, when I went out for the band and that time they didn't have any instruments to play, they, then I went out for the drums and they gave me a couple of drum sticks, and I never got to be a drummer, you know, so that was a bit discouraging. So an uncle gave me a clarinet. An old Albert clarinet, highly prized nowadays instead of the Boehms. And my mother made me sort of a little case for it. And I used to walk from Cambridge to Roxbury to be in a WPA band. And then walk back. It was an awfully long walk. And yet, it didn't bother me at all.

RB: What sort of music were they playing in that band?

CB: Yes, now what did they played? Mostly Strauss waltzes. Usually very simple kinds of things, because the people involved weren't advanced at all. The person who led it was probably a musician but nobody else was. Everybody else was sort of amateurs you know.

RB: Were they of all ages or were they just mostly young people?

CB: Mostly young people.

RB: Who did you play for?

CB: We never played for anybody, we just practiced all the time.

RB: You didn't have concerts?

CB: No, we didn't have concerts. However, that did lead to my having the biggest musical thrill of my life and that is playing in a community symphony orchestra. So we played the New World Symphony and I was playing fourth clarinet. And as you know, the clarinets sit in sort of the center of the entire orchestra and the whole thrill was just being there having all of this music going around me, and seeing the conductor in front there. As you know, the fourth clarinet does very little but hold notes for the chords, but that was exactly what I was able to do at that time and I got a big bang out of that, and I always wished to do more along those lines.

RB: And where was this, in Boston, Cambridge, or . . .?

CB: The actual concert that we had was in the auditorium of the Boston State College. It was then called the, I don't know what it was called back in those days, Normal School I guess. That was a high point!

RB: Did you have exhibits of your art work at either the WPA school or the Adult Education School?

CB: No, I don't remember any exhibits.

RB: You said you went around to the museums. Would that mainly be with your parents or your friends as well?

CB: No, no, parents. I don't remember going with my friends. Although I do remember one time one teacher, Mr. Santoro [phon. sp.], took a class to Newberry Street in Boston, or Commonwealth Avenue I guess it was, where there there was a gallery and again we seemed to be doing more fooling around than we were looking at the pictures. Whereas, when I went with my parents to the Museum of Fine Arts we were serious and -- like entering some important institution, you see.

RB: Would your parents point things out to you or were you mainly just left free to look?

CB: No, no, we would talk. They would talk about it. I remember from those days particularly the great cast room that has now disappeared and the Greek sculpture and that sort of thing. That seemed to be what they thought was things that we should look at, the Greek sculpture, the Egyptian things, and the oil paintings. There must have been other things in the museum but I don't recall them. I don't remember any prints or drawings and that sort of thing.

RB: Do you remember anything that particularly caught your attention during those visits?

CB: The Greek sculpture, the sculpture things.

RB: The casts as well as the old things?

CB: I'm not sure that I knew the difference at the time, but the statues, as I recall them, were the things that really interested me.

RB: Do you recall what in those particularly appealed to you?

CB: No. The fact that, you know, they were like people, like life or something. I really don't know, I can't remember that. Although it would be interesting for me to think about that at some point and see if I could dig that up and see if there were something. Well, see, after that -- that was high school. I went from there to art school, and then I went to museums so often this all sort of runs together and I became very familiar with some of the works there as though I sort of owned them. And I like certain individual ones. But I'm not exactly sure when that first occurred to me. Another thing that did happen that was important was when we went to the Gardner Museum. And that was a big event. It was a very different kind of place, you know. And the great thing about the Gardner is it is the same now as it was whenever, I don't know when it was started, but I first went in perhaps the '30s or something like that and boy, it's -- everything is right there.

RB: So was that stunning for what? Memorable?

CB: Well, memorable because when I go back again what I saw first is where it was and it's just as interesting, you know. And some of the things are in dark corners, you know. To go to the Gardner Museum was an adventure, you know. It wasn't so much like going to the museum, it was going to a very special kind of museum. Whereas the Museum of Fine Arts always seemed to be, well, different.

RB: Well, now, then after your last year of high school you decided you wanted to go to art school?

CB: Yeah. My father wanted me to go to Harvard and get a liberal arts education. And I thought it might be better to go to art school. And I guess in a way I was sort of afraid of going to Harvard. You know, I wasn't that smart. And the smartest kids, the ones that graduated as valedictorians, et cetera, were going to Harvard, you see. And I wasn't as smart as that, so I didn't. Although an interesting sidelight might be that one of the fellows I hung around with, a fellow named Ted Onassis, was an artist and we both were in the same art class and we both were as good, I think he might have been almost as good as I was, in sort of checking everything out. But anyway, his father made him go to Harvard. Now, both of our fathers wanted us to go to Harvard. His father had the money and also forced him to go. My father said I could do whatever I wanted to do. And when he went to Harvard he studied and became a lawyer. He's now a lawyer in Boston. But he didn't want to go to Harvard and he had a nervous breakdown and he had a very hard life after he recovered. Whereas I went to art school and immediately liked it and enjoyed it and from that point on I've liked all kinds of studying and all kinds of, you know, liked everything about learning since then. Whereas I did not like it up to that point. When we met later on and started talking about our experiences it was kind of interesting, the two directions we went through. In fact, Ted Onassis is the lawyer we now have who came to my opening and said, "Wow," you know. Then he began to sort of reminisce about what he might have done had he . . . . Because he saw the amount of work that I had done in like a whole. And he's about the same age that I am and it was a kind of interesting sort of closing of a circle. This happened just a few months ago.

RB: Now, and so your father you can credit with understanding that you should follow what you felt was your own basic wishes?

CB: That's right. That's right. He, and I credit him again later, when, I guess it was after the first and second

year, and the third year we had to choose a major. And he and my mother wanted me to become a teacher, a nice and safe thing to do. And I wanted to become an illustrator. So when I told one of the teachers there, I suppose sort of an advisor, that my parents wanted me to go into art education and I wanted to go into painting and illustration, he said, "Well, bring your father up or have him come to see me, or bring your parents up or have them come to see me, you know, either with you or without, and let me talk to them, because I can explain to them to differences." And I said, "Sure." And Mr. O'Donnell, a great guy, one of my favorite teachers there anyhow even before this happened, and he talked to my father. My mother didn't go. I don't know why. And my father then changed his mind and said, yes, he thought it might be a good idea for me to become an illustrator. Which I thought was wonderful.

RB: Did your brothers likewise follow their inclinations?

CB: Let's see, now, to some extent yes. I don't know if anybody has a real inclination to be a social worker, but that's what happened to my brother. You know, it's one of those things that he may have gone into directly or may have backed into it. I don't know. My younger brother went into writing and publishing and editing and that sort of thing. I suppose that's what he really wanted to do. And my sister, what did she go into? Well, she is now working at the library at Harvard. I don't really know what she wanted to do. But I don't know whether people really *want* to be librarians or whether they go to college and then become something.

RB: [Inaudible]

CB: Probably, yeah, I'm not quite sure. I don't know that you really have to have the same kind of talent or drive to be a librarian as you do to be an artist. You see, it's a slightly different . . . .

RB: Well, now, did you have to sit for an examination for your Master's at the school of art?

CB: You present a portfolio. And, of course, you take the regular SATs or whatever they had. The college boards, they called them in those days. And you get some sort of rating on those. I didn't have any trouble with that at all, so no problem. I wasn't even afraid of it, you know. When I saw, like, my daughter going through the throws of having to take the test and getting into college and whether they were going to accept her or not -- you know, it just didn't even occur to me back in those days to . . . . I had all sorts of confidence, you know. [Laughter]

CB: Was the Massachusetts School of Art the place you had your mind set on?

CB: Mostly because I didn't know of any others, you see. And later I found that there was such a thing as a Museum School and of course the U didn't exist in those days.

RB: Yeah. And how did you come to know all of those school?

CB: I don't know. Somebody in my family knew somebody who had gone there or heard of it or something of that sort. I personally didn't know of it. But maybe somebody in high school told me about it -- it's all kind of vague in my mind.

RB: Well, when you went there, do you recall what was you first got into? Apart from prescribed courses, what kind of stands out in your . . .?

CB: Well, it's the people, you know. The guys I hung around with. And the girls, and the way they talked and looked and acted, you know. They were so different from other kinds of people. You see, in those days artists were very different from regular students. You could, you know, tell them apart. They seemed to be stranger. Now all students look alike. They all dress alike. They are all in the same kind of, you know, hair and dungarees kind of things. But then the artists were the different ones. They would be, I don't know how to explain it, but they were more of a group, and different from other students. And when you had the art group there the people, they talked about art and the arts and, you know, music and writing and literature and the theater. They were all involved in all those things. And everybody seemed to play an instrument, and everybody did a little acting or knew somebody, or they were dancers, you know, that sort of thing. Whereas, nowadays most students, a larger group of students, have more of a tendency . . . . In fact, when I started teaching, I began to check this out just for my own satisfaction. I'd ask groups in my -- I have classes of, you know groups of thirty in several classes. I'd just take a little poll and say: How many of you know an artist? How many of you have artists in your families? You know. And it would come out to be zero. Nowadays when I ask that, we have, you know, the children of artists. Everybody knows an artist, they can talk to them. They know what art is. They have a -- when they enter high school. Forty years later it's very different.

RB: It was very much the life of a small group of people then compared to now.

CB: That's right, and also the school was smaller. And they were a cohesive group.

B: So you developed some close chums right off the bat.

CB: Right. Un huh. That's right. And there were people who, you know, I used to hang around with both in school and out of school. I'd go over to their houses and they'd come over to my house. It was a much more social, congenial group than high school had been.

RB: Were they mostly people from the greater Boston area?

CB: No, practically nobody from greater Boston went to Mass College of Art. That's one of those strange things. One of the things that happened during the, oh, I guess the '60s when they began to recruit people, they found when they did the statistics, they found that it was just . . . . [INTERRUPTION] They found that they came primarily from the suburbs and one of my best friends, Art Wood, came from western Massachusetts. And it was interesting to me because these people would come and live in Boston. Now, when I was going to art school, I was living at home. I lived in Cambridge and would walk across the river to the school. And one of the girls I hung around with lived in Waltham, and one of the other fellows lived in Dorchester, which I guess one of the people who came from Boston. I think it was four or five people I used to hang around with were from out of town. One came from around the Worcester way.

RB: There was no reason that you can think of why there were so few from Boston, can you?

CB: Well at the time I didn't know whether, you know, the

RB: Do you supopose more went to the Museum School?

CB: Could be, yeah. Because the Museum School had more scholarships that they would give to the high school students who took classes at the museum. And that was a route that I did not follow, you see.

RB: What were the basic courses you'd start out with?

CB: Well, when I went over there it looked like a little bit of everything. Drawing, and painting, and watercolor, and design and lettering. And then there were very few academic courses such as English and psychology, and . . . .

RB: There were those few, huh?

CB: Yeah. Art history, of course, and something called constitutional history, which we still have as a kind of state requirement -- to make us good citizens, I suppose.

RB: Was that taught in a rather perfunctory manner?

CB: Well, most of the academics were taught in a rather perfunctory manner. The academic faculty had an inferiority complex because it was really all art, you know, and they felt that they were sort of a service group to the art.

RB: Can you characterize some of your teachers that you had there, at least the fellows you had in the beginning?

CB: Well, there were good guys, bad guys, the ones I liked, the ones I didn't like. But as a whole they were primarily Anglo Saxon WASP types with no ethnics. Everybody had a name, you know, that was an Anglo name, kind of thing. And they all had that kind of Protestant background. It was a very limited group. They were, they tended to be somewhat, you know, the old Tarbell-Benson -- that's what they admired, you see.

RB: You feel that kind of background, at least in the Boston area, meant that they were rather conservative in those days, timid about . . .?

CB: Oh yeah, they not really *were* conservative, but you know but when you looked at what they did, the Guild of Boston Artists, for instance, if they were associated with any group. And they would even denigrate all modern art. You know, they had the big Picasso show, or these big shows that come in. You know, Guernica came; I don't know when that was but while I was at art school -- and they thought it was terrible. They didn't think he should be allowed to paint. I think they were even against Van Gogh when they had him on the campus. It was all Boston School. Tarbell painting.

RB: Were they mostly older people?

CB: Not mostly. People like Dick Green and Ernest L. Major and . . . .

RB: What were they like? Can you characterize them as teachers?

CB: Well, they, Hamilton -- well, they were conservative. Well, first, he tried to be a character. He had a big dog and he and I didn't get along at all. He was much too limited. For instance, I painted a watercolor of myself and put cool tones in around my cheeks there, a little bit of green, you know, I suppose, you know, if you are going to dig down deep, to sort of signify the fact that I was growing a beard you know. And so I think I wanted to look a little unshaven, to look a little arty, this kind of thing, you know. I don't remember why I did it, but anyway. And he complained about it being too green, you know. He said, "Skin isn't green." And I said, "Well, it's the way it feels," kind of thing, you know. You know, just completely out of what I was interested in doing at the moment, you see. I considered myself to be being a wild, radical modernist. You see, I was very much interested in all that sort of thing.

RB: So you came to loggerheads with him. Was he a fairly contentious sort?

CB: Oh yeah. Oh yeah.

RB: He was a scrapper.

CB: He said, "There's only one way to draw, in this class at least." I got the impression there was only one way to draw *ever* from him, but I suppose he was limiting it just to give the benefit of the doubt. And you had to draw with chalk on dark paper and erase it with white bread. No other way of doing it. And so I guess if he saw you with an eraser -- nothing experimental. And I have drawings like that now that I did. And what he was trying to show us, of course, was the chiaroscuro, the light on dark, that is the basis for major painting, you know, but he didn't even use the chiaroscuro woodcut of three tones, only two tones, light and dark, you see. I just saw the motion picture, Apocalypse Now, and the other picture, The Black Stallion, both of which have gone back to that kind of single lighting, darkness of Caravaggio. It is extremely interesting to see that Coppola is using that as his trademark. Did you see those two pictures?

RB: Un huh.

CB: They were fascinating for just that reason. Now when I first saw it, I didn't know what was going on. And then I began to see, "Yeah, this is what he's doing," you see. And then I remembered my bread and chalk, you know. When I see just one side of a head lit up you know and the rest of it going in the dark, you know. And it's an exaggeration of some of those, you know, beautiful darknesses that happen in Rembrandt, frankly. And there's a lot stuff -- interesting tonalities settled out in the darks, you see. Of course Coppola didn't put that in, nor did Ernest L. Major, you see, and that's what's wrong with them in relation to what I think should happen. Carravagio did, you see, and I think this is the way they see it. Now I don't know, I didn't read that in a review or anything but its really one of those things that I think is a connection. You know, the old Hollywood double lighting is out as far as Coppola goes, you see. And certainly that's one of the those things we were brought up on as being kind of flashy and modern, you see. And I was great for, oh, way back when I was, what are we talking about, between between '38 and '42, you see. I was turned on to the double lighting that, you know, became part of comic strips and science fiction and that sort of thing. Although I was able, of course, to appreciate the beauty of it, but that's Ernest L. Major, you see. Oh, and another thing -- I'm getting excited about this. At that time Citizen Kane came out, and Citizen Kane was the *greatest* picture I had *ever* seen in my whole life. And of course, all of our gang saw it two or three times -- we were cultists way back then, you know, and we were praising it, you know. And of course he used some heavy light and dark, but Orson Wells was a fantastic genius, and used a little bit of everything you see. And he was the first one to use the ceilings and was always shooting -- and we were very excited about this. And the only person that did go along with us was O'Donnell, the one I liked. Major, of course, said, "What do they mean calling a moving picture Citizen Kane -- we are all citizens. You see, it was that kind of problem. It was that kind of thing that really turned me, and I say *us*, off. Because our group, whatever percentage of the class it was, were completely appalled by his lack of interest in what was going on at the moment, you know, contemporary. And also what was great about it because it was different, because we had never seen anything like this before.

RB: He had made up his mind and he had a predisposition to what he felt was correct, huh?

CB: Un huh.

RB: He would put down these other things?

CB: Oh yeah, everything except, Tarbell, Benson, Aldo, Hibbard, you know, Elmer Green. That group did it correctly, right. This was it! Good! And you know those people are . . . .

RB: Yeah, yeah. So that was -- you learned something, I guess, even in the straight jacket of . . .

CB: Oh sure! I learned to . . .

RB: . . . even though you detested it.

CB: Yes, but I know now that what I learned was valuable. It was the way it was taught, not what learned. That's what I . . . .

RB: Yeah. What were some of the other teachers -- you mentioned O'Donnell?

CB: O'Donnell was my favorite, yeah.

RB: What did he teach?

CB: Well, he was a funny guy. He sort of goofed off and he didn't do much of anything. He would come in and he'd smoke a pipe, and he would read to us, and he would talk to us about ideas, about things you know. He would laugh about Schickelgoober [phon. sp.], you know. We'd say, "Who is he?" you know. He'd say, "It's Adolph Hitler," you know. "He's a painter," you know. And he would talk about contemporary things. He'd read Time Magazine, you know. He would send us, and take us to a theater down behind Beacon Hill there. Joy Street? There was a Joy Street theater there in the complex and artists' places were right there. And he'd take us down to that theater, and he'd drive us to Worcester to see an exhibition. He would take us into Boston, you know. That was downtown Boston, we were already in Boston. You know, he was interested in the cultural aspect and he also liked a lot of things. There was a little magazine at the time called Coronet. And if I'm not mistaken he did some writing and he had one of his things published in that, you know. And you know it made us all feel great and while we were drawing he'd read. Fantastic thing to do, huh! And he'd walk out of the class. He was a great guy you know.

RB: You learned drawing from him?

CB: We did a lot of things. He taught drawing, he taught life, he taught illustration in a very interesting manner. He would bring in people. As far as I remember things in that class, Guianu [phon. sp.], is a name that stuck with me all these years. I had never even seen much if any of him since then. But he was one of the favorites and he had a style -- Guianu had a style which O'Donnell liked -- which we did. And then, you know, fascinating things would happen in that class you know. He would give us an assignment and people would do it in very different ways and he would appreciate the differences. And also he would criticize with humor. He wouldn't -- not sarcastic, but we'd laugh you know. And it was a kind of an exciting class.

RB: He'd get you to laugh along with him.

CB: Yeah, it was a good way to do it. If I were to, you know, pattern my teaching after anybody I would much more do it after O'Donnell than -- and also he was an "out," see. He wasn't one of the "in" group, it seemed to me. Because later he got fired for, ah, I don't know, doing something to somebody's wife, something like that. I don't know all of it. That was after I left the school. And I think he had to marry somebody else -- some scandal, anyhow. Which was a great -- you know, if you could do it, he would do it, kind of thing. He even lived in a very strange house down there on the Fenway, near the -- there was a Dutch house that has a . . . . That was the house he lived in, you know, and he'd have parties there. And it was big, it had the big windows. He used to do strange -- he'd wear a coat with a cape, you know. Little cape top on it. Good guy!

RB: Un huh. What had his background been, do you know?

CB: I don't know. He may have been a person who had tried to be an artist and was unsuccessful because he wasn't very good at it. I don't remember anything he ever -- he wasn't clever or a skilled artist, in the way that Philbrick was. As far as I know, he wasn't an exhibiting artist. He was an art teacher.

CB: You feel he was good because he allowed you all to explore, huh?

CB: Oh, I feel he was good because he was interesting, you know. I mean -- and I think that I learned something there, same as I learned with Ernest L. Major. And Hamilton was just dull.

RB: What was O'Donnell's first name?

CB: I'm trying to think of it.

RB: And what did Hamilton teach?

RB: He was from the old school. Taught painting in the way that it was taught in those days. You'd set up a still life in a box and you'd put your canvas to the side of it exactly on the picture plane of the still life. You'd then draw and paint it from standing, oh, maybe a few feet, maybe six feet back, and then you walk up to it and paint it and walk back and walk back and forth. So you are making that exactly the way it appeared within your entire cone of vision, you see.

RB: Pretty dull.

CB" Well dull, but interesting technically. Certainly a way to make trompe l'oeuil. Make it look exactly the way it is. And the dust would accumulate and you had to paint the dust and so on, you know. It's interesting. I mean, he was not antagonistic, he was just kind of, well, ordinary you know. Straight, technical kinds of thing. Worth studying.

RB: Who were some of the other teachers? You mentioned Philbrick. Did you have him at one point or other?

CB: Yes, I had Philbrick. Philbrick and I got along quite well. I thought that he was a little bit on the superficial side and a little bit on the light, decorative side. I considered myself to be deep and modern and complex in dealing with all art on many different levels, you see. And he tended to paint watercolors and talk along in a manner that was, I would, say lightweight or clever. A little bit on the superficial side. I mean, I don't want him to hear all of this, but you know . . . .

RB: What sort of things would he talk about?

CB: Well, for instance, he taught printmaking and I remember making a woodcut of a trumpet, and to me it expressed the roughness of, let's say, early jazz or the people who have learned how to play by themselves, where they may be fingering a little differently. Or this whole idea of, let's say, Louis Armstrong or somebody. Not so much the jazz trumpeter's trumpeter, but the epitome of all this kind of self-learned kind of thing, see. And when I showed him this, of course, this was sort of in my mind that his comment was, "Why don't you put some notes coming out of the front of his ...." Which meant he missed the whole thing, you see. He didn't understand that you do it in this way. And of course I was looking at the woodcut artists, you know, the German expressionists and this kind of thing, you see. It's that kind of thing, you see. And there were other things, like when I went . . . .

RB: You were drawing expressive form.

CB: I thought I was being, you know, deep and expressive and it didn't get across to him so evidently I didn't do it well enough so that he could understand it but that's what I was trying for and he didn't seem to talk to me in a manner that tried to understand what I was doing, but made a comment that showed me immediately that he missed what I was trying to do, you see.

RB: Yeah.

CB: And the same thing in relation to portrait. He also taught portrait. And we'd have a model and then I'd make drawings. He said, "Why don't you come over here and do the model, you know, straight on instead of trying to get angles all the time. I said okay, you know. And I went over. But again he didn't see why I was trying to get angles. And, you know, one of the definitions for art that I thought I was working with at that time was uniqueness, and singularity, and personality, you know. And not the usual three-quarter academic formal portrait. And again it was a slight misunderstanding here. He just thought -- he didn't bother to understand. Now I'm not saying this against him, so much as it just didn't meet exactly where I was at the time, you see.

RB: Do you think a number of your fellow students were pushing against the straight jackets of Major and Philbrick?

CB: We're really going for those two guys! Major I was against, didn't like. Philbrick I liked, it's just that he didn't really seem to be sympathetic or leading the student or suggesting, opening doors, you know, and explaining why he thinks you do it this way rather than just saying you should.

RB: Un huh.

CB: I hate to talk about this so long because it puts the wrong emphasis on it, you know. I mean the total of it, that is the totality of Philbrick's teaching was good, you know, top. And I learned a lot. It's just that intellectually we missed each other a little bit.

RB: Did you share these interests and concerns you just expressed here with a number of your fellow students?

CB: Oh yeah, this was one of those things that we were complaining about. You see, we felt that Mass Art wasn't modern, you know. We were the young turks, we were the people who were going to change the world, you know. We wanted the latest in everything, you see. We'd read James Joyce and, as I say, movies were important because they were the latest thing out. Jazz of course was terribly important at that time. There was people like Chick Webb and Benny Goodman, you know. And what was good about them. And we, who knew everything, would, you know, try to enlighten the rest of the school by having assemblies -- and then Mark Kelly was another one of these guys who was up with everything, you know. He played a bass. No, he played a guitar and his brother played a bass. I was playing piano by that time. And he brought in a bunch of records and wanted to show how the kind of thing he was interested in was related to the art we were doing at that particular time. So

he brought in these records, of -- well, one was, to make the point, let's see, Harry James playing "Boy Meets Horn" with the Benny Goodman Orchestra. And what he was trying to say was this is a piece in which when you play the trumpet you play these half notes in between notes rather than the clear notes, you see. I was horrified when I heard what he had said about this because he was praising this to the sky, being a great contribution to jazz, how this person would use these notes. I said, "Why don't you go to the original?" That was written for Stewart in Duke Ellington's orchestra and he was the one who invented it. He was the one who made the thing up. And so then, you know, he was taking a secondary source. And when he found out the primary source we was completely excited about the whole thing. So it was that kind of give and take that we found to be particularly interesting.

RB: Did you have an assembly for the school?

CB: Yeah, as I say, we had assemblies in those days and then students and people would present various things, you see. This was sort of a highlight, and then of course Art Wood was also a musician, and he knew about Duke Ellington whereas Kelly didn't. And so the same thing would happen when we were dealing with cartoonists, for instance. You know, if somebody found something. We spent a lot of time going around to the old bookstores you see. And we'd find Alice in Wonderland and then we'd say but that isn't the original Alice in Wonderland, so we'd look for another Alice in Wonderland. And then we'd look at the way the steel engraving was done, you see, and trying to make that kind of connection you see, primary sources. You know, there's one Alice in Wonderland where you look at the page, when you turn the page over there's the Cheshire Cat is up there and when you turn it back, and back and forth, the Cheshire cat smiles and doesn't smile. These were the kind of things you know that he'd built in. And those things you just read about and you find those things, and in other editions don't have it. It's great, you know. I mean, we learned from each other because that's what somebody else would tell us, nothing to do with the teachers. That's what's so good about that group of people you know.

RB: With maybe one exception, the teachers weren't the source of this exploration into unadulterated originality, right? You got this mostly out on your own?

CB: Yeah, but you know, I'm really building this up as though we were doing it -- I'm sure all students do this sort of thing. It's just that we felt this was why we were there. And I never felt that in high school or I never felt that in any other school. I'd never felt up until then, that, you know, what you learn is well beyond what you are taught in the classroom. Now, in the classroom you get an assignment and you are suppose to do that, but that wasn't the most important thing -- it was important, but not the most important. Whereas in high school it was all. Everything else was outside of it and but unrelated to it. It was in art school where I and this group began to integrate our total lives so that everything we did was related to everything else. Sounds so highfalutin', but that's really I think what made the difference, you see.

RB: So it didn't matter too much whether the school itself was exciting or broadminded or not, because you people had this life . . . .

CB: Yeah, everything was cheap in those days. You could go to the symphony, you know, you could always stand up. And, I don't know, it was something like fifty cents, you know. You could go to the movies all the time, because in relation to what you had it was cheaper. It wasn't just less money.

RB: It was cheaper.

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A]

[TAPE 1, SIDE B]

CB: Yeah, so that you could afford it. Now the kids nowadays cannot afford to go to it. Whereas we could and we were just as poor as anybody else, you see. We didn't have any extra money, but we could do it, see. Ans all the old bookstores have disappeared, you know. I mean, I used to spend hours looking through old magazines -- along Huntington Avenue there were at least ten bookstores. You could start in the afternoon after school and walk down to Copley Square, and then get a bite to eat, and you could spend oh, five, six, seven hours just enjoying old books, you know. And buying a magazine for a nickel after you get through. Great. Great days.

RB: Now in the school, one of its primary reasons for, perhaps its primary job, was to produce teachers, school teachers of art?

CB: Right. Un huh.

RB: You weren't in that group, were you?

CB: We were down on them. Nah, we were the elite. We were the painters, we were the artists, and those other people became teachers because they couldn't do "art." Quotation marks. That's what we felt. In fact one of my

best friends now, a fellow named Lloyd Schultz [phon. sp.], who we summer with down in Nantucket, was in the art education group and we were in the painting group, and we used to argue and fight about this thing in a very friendly kind of way you know. He's now an abstractionist as he was then, you know, and he was the defender of the art teacher being an artist. That later, of course, became what art teaching was all about. But those days, an art teacher was a person, I suppose the same as now, who can teach first and was an artist second, see. We thought of ourselves as artist first and if we did teach it would just be because, you know, we couldn't make a living, see.

RB: And Schultz felt that you should learn to teach?

CB: No, Schultz thought that you should be an artist first, but he was a teacher. But he defended our way of thinking although he was in the opposite camp, whereas the rest of those guys and girls there would justify their being -- you know, they would say, which makes a good amount of sense, that you if you are a teacher you can teach, you know, high school students and students a lot of things better if you are not a good artist, in the sense that a person who is an artist tends to think that people are motivated in a manner that the teacher knows the person is not motivated. So the teacher is the one who has to stimulate the student, whereas if a person is an artist he does not need anybody to stimulate him, he is ready to go. He's doing it, you see. He does a lot of exploring on his own.

R: And their argument was that therefore you couldn't -- because you were all ready to go and you couldn't motivate the . . . .

CB: You couldn't come down to their level or you couldn't identify with them at all. You know, we would sit around drinking coffee all night and talking about these kinds of things, you see. All of which, you know, swapped around because then I changed, and I became a teacher.

RB: But it was good that you'd gone through this period where you felt you were an artist first.

CB: I always felt that, you see. As I just told you, I did not want to be a teacher!

RB: You didn't quite buy ever their argument that it's perhaps good not to be a good artist to be down . . . .

GB: Yeah, now I do, you see. Now I buy that.

RB: You do?

CB: Oh yes, now I know what they were saying. I didn't understand it at the time. Now I know that there is a difference. It's a big difference between the person who can teach somebody and the person who can do it. And there's no correlation between the person who can do it being able to tell another person how to do it. And I find that over at the art college all the time. There are people who are excellent artists who are terrible teachers.

RB: But if you can get that bridge, you've got a super person, don't you?

CB: Supposedly, theoretically, yes. Which is, of course, what I consider myself to be because I have degrees in both fine arts and in education.

RB: Yeah.

CB: And to me that's what a person needs. You have to know the why's as well as the how's. And also he has to have inner motivation. And also you have to go through and do everything that the student is going to do. Now there are people in my college who give assignments they haven't done. And of course the person who studied teacher education would never do that. They would know they have to do everything before the student does it so they will know all the possibilities and therefore they can go around and make suggestions, open the doors in exactly the same plane and in a sympathetic manner to the person. That's what so strong about the opposite. There are two ways to do it. One is you can have a skill that you can impart to somebody else if they do it exactly the way you do it and you know exactly how you did it. Very often you have to go and, you know, think about and analyze just what you are doing. That's an excellent way of teaching a typical situation. The other is that you have to be very much involved with what the other person's thinking and doing and what kind of life they're living and what they understand so that you don't use terms that they are unfamiliar with or you don't have a vocabulary that they can identify with. And those are two extremes and of course most people are somewhere in the middle, you see. And that's the whole gamut of teaching.

RB: But you came to find that the latter extreme is perhaps the soundest one in teaching art?

CB: Which is the one where you are prepared in both theories and in the way to do that, is that what you mean? Yes, that's the one that I find is the one that the teachers that taught me from that point of view are the ones that I identified with best. And that's what I try to do in relation to my students.

RB: Was that true of O'Donnell and some of these people under him?

CB: Yeah, I think that O'Donnell, for instance, was a person who may not have been as successful a technician or a skilled draftsman of watercolors as he would like to be. But he understood -- that as he did it to the extent that he could talk about how to do it from having done it. Okay. Whereas somebody like, let's see, Gavin, who used to teach tempera painting, would do it from a completely technical point of view, see. Step 1, step 2, step 3, step 4. You do step 1, step 2, until you get good. That's what you need to learn. But you can't criticize that, evaluate it, with a different set of criteria, see. You have to do it on that basis. Then you can't go around and say, "But, you know, the design is wrong," because you aren't talking about design, you are talking about how to apply the paint from the various layers, you see. And that's what's so confusing -- people set up one frame of reference and then criticize with another one and then everybody gets confused. The students, the teacher, they don't even know what they are talking about.

RB: So as you look back on it, teaching art is perhaps, very often at least, best in the hands of those who know how to teach at the level of the student?

CB: Right.

RB: Because you can't, you can't teach genius or great talent. You can teach simply the technical.

CB: Right. That's it. And also you have to do what I call opening doors for people. You can't just have -- you can, of course, but I'm just saying one way to do it is to not have them just do what you are teaching them. You name anything -- I'm going to teach you how to draw a still life. You're not only going to draw the still life but you have got to do everything else that relates to the still life if you can think of it. If the still life has anything to do with dance positions, you know, like Pilobolus, where you have these dancers look like animals. Now that kind of thing is much more interesting when you relate that to something else. Then you have a broader spectrum for the individual to think about and to do and to relate to, you see. And if you bring in examples of still life paintings, you can bring in the kind of still life painting that is as close to what you want the student to do and what the student may be interested in. But you also at the same time should bring in other examples so that they will see that what you're telling them is not the be-all and end-all. So they are not convinced ever that they are doing it exactly right and the way you're telling them is the, you see. I think too many teachers do only one of those things you see. And when you show slides you show . . . . Well, I don't want to spend a lot of time yalking about how to teach, but, you know, it's one of the things I do get excited about, you see. And I think that Mass Art was good in the early days for getting across those technical things that have become second nature and therefore there's no struggle once you have, you know, done Hamilton's painting this way or other th, you know, most all the things ... then you can go on to perhaps do other things. What's wrong with contemporary education is that you very often start at the end and the person does his own thing with no basis and with no way of evaluating it. You know, everything that person does that came out of him is good because it came out of that person. And then you can say, "but." And what the "but" means is nothing, the person doesn't know what you are saying but about. You know, "I put those spots down on there, okay that's it." And if you're talking about design and then you have to use words like symmetry or non-, or something like that, then they know whether it's symmetrical or not. But if it's just there there's no way of criticizing it. But anyway . . . .

RB: When you got out, in '42, did you have a focus? Did you know pretty much what -- what had you concentrated in?

CB: That was the war, you see, you didn't have to concentrate on anything. Life . . . .

RB: What effect did that have on you while you were in school -- the war?

CB: Well, see, this happened December the 7th, 1941. And then I graduated the following year. So I knew after December 7, '41, that I'd be drafted. Everybody was getting drafted and that I would either have to go to war or -- I'd have to do something. I wouldn't have to bother to look for a job, that's what I meant. So if I wanted to be an artist, nobody even thought about those things at that time.

RB: That changed your whole life?

CB: Oh yeah, just -- actually I didn't know what I was going to do anyhow. I mean, I graduated from Fine Arts and I was a painter and that's it. So I figured I'd go out and get a job doing something. And I finally did of course, you know, like painting signs and mixing paint and doing silkscreens and things. But the war sort of separated that between '42 and then '45 and '46.

RB: Had you a chance before you went into the wartime service, had you a chance to talk with older artists, painters and the like?

CB: No, ah, no. Just I graduated in what, June, and went directly in the Navy Yard about July and worked in the

Navy Yard until I got drafted. And when I got drafted I got 4F'd, went back and had to stay in the Navy Yard until the war was over. So, I was a laborer in the Navy Yard and . . . .

RB: Well, they couldn't use your skills, your newly minted skills?

CB: I didn't want to use my skills. A lot of the people who went to art school became draftsmen, and worked in that, kind of tracing, and sort of thing and it didn't seem to make any sense to me. I thought I was only going to be there a very short time, you know, until I'd get drafted, a few months. I thought the war was going to be short time you know. I could have taken -- oh, I guess that's not absolutely true, now that I think about it. I took a test for some sort of something and flunked it. So I couldn't -- I probably could have taken it again, some sort of counting boxes or whatever it was.

RB: You didn't measure high on the . . . ?

CB: And I didn't really want to. I mean, I knew at the time that I did not want to be a draftsman.

RB: Why not?

CB: Oh, I don't know, it seemed like anti-art. I was still an artist, you know, and still thinking of myself only as an artist. And I carried that into my bilge cleaning and tank cleaning. I was assigned to the riggers shop as a laborer. And they used to put us into these things and do all sorts of terrible -- which I think now may have affected my health; I'm not in very perfect health. I think now they have these ideas about asbestos, you know. And I worked around asbestos and we'd go in these tanks and these tanks would come in, the ships would have holes in them and decks blown off, this sort of thing, and we'd have to go in clean up and fix these things. And all sorts of oil, you know, welding stuff, you know. Anyway, that to me was much more interesting, by the way.

RB: Why do you think it was?

CB: Well, it just was, you see. I mean, more macho, you know, more manly, more something. More like -- you know, there was a kind of spirit in that war that wasn't in this war.

RB: Un huh.

CB: You know, the last Vietnam War. There was something about that. It was all so temporary. I knew I was going to be -- in fact, I was going into the service at any time, you see. And so I used to read about how to fix guns and that sort of thing. I was interested in that sort of thing, you know. And it wasn't terrifying or anything. In fact, that's one of those things, the war is a kind of liberating thing from a humdrum life, you know. A lot of people, you know, that was the biggest thing that ever happened to them you know. There are guys now who still talk about the war, you see. Well, that was part of what I was feeling, you see. And I was sort of debating whether to go into the Navy or the Army, that kind of thing, you know. And anyway, the thing I actually did was to develop a kind of visual memory that allowed me to go to work every day in these conditions and come home and draw big pictures of them. And then I'd go in and then the part of the picture that was blank that I couldn't remember, I'd go in and focus on that and just memorize that so I could then come home and put that in. Because in a way I -- I wasn't a war correspondent or anything, so I assumed, without even asking, they didn't want me sitting around sketching, you see. So I would just memorize. This was very interesting to me, you know. Because as I made these big drawings and complex drawings, I would do it in this magical manner of forcing myself to be a photographer -- "I am a camera," kind of thing, you see. It was great, you know. In a way I enjoyed that time of the war and the working -- it was something that I had never seen before and never seen since, you know. The whole Navy thing, the darkness, the cold, the kind of excitement, the . . . . Maybe another couple of years on it -- but it was very interesting.

RB: That was your wartime service, then.

CB: Yeah, I never went in the actual service. I'd just go from one shipyard to the other. I'd go over to Charlestown and over to South Boston.

RB: Did you get along well as an educated young artist with your fellow laborers or were there quarrels and things?

CB: Oh, I, no. I by no means flaunted my education. No, I wouldn't even mention it. Oh no. I was just one of the boys. Tried to be, anyhow. I really wasn't, but I did not get real obvious, you see. Because I had seen what happened to people who did, you see. I just figured, well, just a little ordinary laborer, you know. And the first time we came in, there were guys -- we'd sit in these tanks, you know. There was a lot of goofing off because there was a lot of time when there was nothing to do but you had to be there. And at other times everybody had to work like mad, you know. Fast. That was what the war was all about. So that was kind of exciting too. And you'd sit around and talk, talk, talk, talk, talk. And people would talk about mostly, you know, sex and girls and

all that sort of stuff. But also their own lives and I'd met a lot of different kinds of people there you know, like Wishel Ishlasky [phon. sp.] was a guy whose name I remember, and there were Italians and Jews and Poles, and blacks from the South, you know. There it's so different from art school, you see. And yet I had developed a kind of interest that sort of made the whole thing better, you know. I didn't look down on being a laborer. I didn't look down of these people, you know. It was a very interesting sociological situation, which I enjoyed.

RB: Did you have problems with the supervisors or you accepted what they told you?

CB: Oh sure. I wasn't rebel. In fact, I was making more money than I'd made in my life. I was making 37 dollars a week, boy, 37.10. Boy, that was a big -- I had finished doing jobs at 10 or 12 dollars a week. It's fantastic when you think of those numbers now, you know.

RB: Was there ever any problems with racism in those days?

CB: Race was very interesting, yeah. In the first place, the first gang were just a bunch of laborers and they were mixed ethnics. Poor uneducated people, you know. Then when it got to being some of the worst jobs, they pulled up blacks and they put those on the worst jobs and they put a black supervisor over them. These were the tank cleaners, you know, you had to go into a hot tank, go into a freezing tank, you know. They'd just lower you down and lower the stuff and clean the bilge and all that sort of thing. And there were a kind of interesting group of people that I ran into. There were about five of us on one of these gangs, you see. And the head person, that was the low boss and was called the Snapper, the Black Snapper, and his name was Harris. He came from the South.

[INTERRUPTION]

CB: Let's see, I was talking about the gang. I don't remember exactly where I stopped but . . . .

RB: Well, you were going to tell about the foreman -- what was he called, the Snapper?

CB: Yeah, he was the small boss and he was a bit officious and we probably just didn't like him because he was the boss. But anyway, his name was Harris and most of the gang were from the South. (I assume that when I was there I was trying to be like everybody else and I did not have a southern accent but I think I had much more of a Southern accent under those conditions.) Therefore, since his name was Harris, we used to always make it drawn out as much as possible. We called him Ass, Ass, here comes Ass, just fun, that's all. Well, I think I'm making the whole deal much more interesting and fun than it was, you know. Sitting here in an arm chair talking about it. It was a miserable day, it was cold, but as I said to repeat, the best thing I got out of it was developing my visual memory so I could make drawings. That's one of the things I teach my students now. You know, tell them the background of which I developed this. To me it's one of those things that an artist already has in some incipient form, this visual memory that merely has to be developed through a series of exercises which I've adapted primarily from Nicolaides' The Natural Way to Draw.

RB: You were doing it even then? You knew of his teaching?

CB: No. No, I didn't know of him. I put them together now.

RB: So you would go home and draw? You were staying with your parents still?

CB: Yeah. I was still living with my family. My father died right then, that is, he was sick that whole year, 1941, and we went from graduation to the graveyard, to, you know, pick out a grave, because we knew he was going to die pretty soon. And he died like a few weeks later. Right there, right after the graduation in 1942. And he was fairly young because I was, what, twenty-one I guess at the time. And he was maybe just pushing 50, I guess.

RB: Was that a big loss for you?

CB: Oh, wow, yeah. Un huh. Yeah. I'm glad it happened then, you see. If it had happened earlier it would have been a bigger loss, but I had gotten my first job and was beginning to make some money and therefore I felt I was on my own. It was a good time to have it happen. Otherwise I would have been more dependent. Of course there -- well, to talk about work, I started work at about age eleven when I started selling papers. And I've worked ever since then. I've always had some little job or big job or go from one job to the other. I've never been out of work and have just been lucky that way.

RB: Did you work while you were at the art school too?

CB: Oh yeah, I used to work in the, it was called the NYA in those days. I used to clean up after school, straighten up the desks. And then I worked in the school store. I became manager later. Washed dishes -- all the other little things that you usually do.

RB: Your friends from art school were a mix of some blacks . . . .

CB: No blacks. No black anything in those schools at that time. No black faculty or anybody. Just one or two students would go through there every two or three years.

RB: Well, did you feel you were exceptional for that reason then, among your fellow students?

CB: You know, that's another thing that was interesting about race relations in those days. I felt the racial pressure to some extent when I was in high school because there were enough blacks in high school to separate us. And we used to hang around together and stuff. When I moved to art school, there were no other blacks. Therefore the group that I was with treated me just like anybody else and the polite thing to do in those days was never to mention it. And so to be different was not popular. And it was really a great relief when civil rights began to be important and, you know, the Black Power sort of thing, when everybody began to talk about it. The liberals back in those days would just accept you but they wouldn't say anything about it. They wouldn't make stupid statements like, "Some of my best friends are black," and that sort of thing. So there was good and bad. And of course in those days, as now, I've always been a sort of a leftist, kind of leaning on the socialistic side, always sort of anti-establishment because the establishment never did anything for me. And so I've always in a sense hung around with those people who might be more interested in recognizing people for themselves rather than for, you know, status in life.

RB: But there still was a tension because they never said -- it was never spoken.

CB: Yes, but it wasn't tension, you see. It was different, kind of -- it wasn't that kind of tension, you see. It was a matter of being, as I understand it now, from the way it was, it was a matter of just being one of the whatever group it was. Yeah, I can remember one or two racial jokes that happened -- I remember Mr. Caine [phon. sp.] was one of them who made one once and then stopped himself the second time because he realized I was in the class. The first time he didn't, see, and I can remember that as an incident. But generally speaking, it was ignored rather than talked about.

RB: Were you pretty aware of your being black and being part of a larger community, lots of which was oppressed?

CB: Yeah. Although I must say that growing up, I had status in this poor community because my father was educated and my mother was educated and we were cultured and we were pillars of the church kind of thing, you know. And we did all the right things you know. We weren't outcasts at all. And he was one of the few people who had a car. And when he got sick, we had a chauffeur and these kind of things, you know. And we had somebody work for us, you know? I mean, everybody was poor but we were a little bit less poor. Whereas when I moved into this group of, you know, the Irish kids and the Jewish kids and the, you know, like Wood and Gomberg, you know, there was a bunch of us. There was a bunch of us. As I said about 5 or 6 people hung around together -- I guess each one of us was something different, you know. And we recognized that we as a group were somewhat different from the total school population. But it wasn't anything selective, it was just that you know when they called your name as you go down the listing, you happened to be in front of and behind somebody else, and therefore you get into this class and sit beside that person. It just sort of developed that way. Whether there were any nuclei of other groups, we never found out, you see, but we thought of ourselves as being slightly special, different, you know.

RB: Well, you were in the war service then through '45 or so? Or into '45?

CB: That's right. I didn't get out until the war stopped, you know. D-Day is, what, in August '45, I think, something like that. And then I was released in the sense that I could work a little longer or I could leave now. At that particular time, I chose to leave immediately.

RB: Why was that? Did you have other plans?

CB: I was just tired of being in the -- I didn't like the job, I mean.

RB: You started that very year, you took at least a course, maybe more, at the Boston Museum School.

CB: Yep. I left and then I began to -- well, see, I always thought of myself as an artist, you see. And so I figured the best way to stay doing art work would be to take an evening course and then I'd be doing art work and hanging around with artists. That's what I really needed. I missed them when I was working at the Navy Yard. And also I was drawing and painting all the time whenever I could. So I began to freelance and I, you know, took a portfolio around and I applied for jobs doing, as I said, sign painting and silk screening and illustration and went to D.C. Heath, and, you know, that sort of thing, and got some little jobs here and there and was able to continue.

RB: You were able to make enough of a living?

CB: Yeah. And then of course I had saved a lot of money during the war because I didn't have to spend much of anything. I lived very cheaply, you know.

RB: Did you go around to art exhibitions and galleries much?

CB: Oh yeah, sure. Plenty of them were active and things were going on during the war. The foreign artists would come over here. Jews would be kicked out, you know, and they were in America and their exhibitions were being shown. Galleries still going.

RB: Any exhibitions that you particularly remember?

CB: Oh, I think the Institute of Modern Art was on Commonwealth Avenue during the war -- or Beacon Street, I guess it was on Beacon Street. And people like Jacob Lawrence, who was in the service, came, you know, and had exhibitions and other service people -- a lot was going on. And I used to work, you know, like twelve hours a day, and then I'd have the other twelve hours off. And sometimes I'd work 8 hours a day. Worked seven days a week. So in the times I wasn't working I'd go see what there was around the town.

RB: Did you get to know some of the older artists that way?

CB: No.

RB: What about some of the dealers?

CB: Well, I didn't get to know any of them. I'd just, you know, go to the galleries and talk to people. It was soon after that the Mirski business turned up, you see. He was on Charles Street and I met some people there.

RB: When did you first exhibit with Mirski?

CB: Let's see. Oh, somewhere it says 1946, on page 2 there, 1946, Boris Mirski Gallery. And so I had started, yeah, I must have been going around to galleries then because I just happened to walk in on Mirski Gallery at one point and met a girl there and we got to talking and we went to some other galleries and then -- I don't know how I got to actually know him but maybe I went there several times and -- oh, I know. There was a fellow by the name of Alston, who was black, who made frames for Mirski. He lived in Cambridge and his specialty was making lamp shades. And we got to talking. He lived on Howard Street and I'd been selling papers around there, and so forth. So I got to talking, you know, and told him I was an artist and he said, show me some things, you know. And that's the way it went.

RB: How did Mirski strike you when you first met him?

CB: Oh, great guy. Mirski was a very personable, extroverted, bouncy guy, you know, friendly. One of those people who I will just for the sake of no other word call liberal, you know. He accepted a person as they were, you know. And of course, again he was an "out," you know, and therefore --

RB: He was an "out."

CB: Oh yes, going on at that particular time there was Stage for Action, there were a lot of communist-front things that I was involved in. The NAACP, you know, picketing. Still going on, you know. During the war there were a lot of problems there about not hiring blacks in jobs and the whole idea of not sending blacks in the service, you know. It wasn't the "hell no, we won't go" situation. But there were problems, you know. It wasn't smooth or anything. So we were always involved in that.

RB: Up here in Boston, too, there were problems here that you were involved in?

CB: There were always problems. There was always segregation, for instance, always lack of jobs. I mean, I didn't have to -- I mean, you couldn't avoid it, so there it was, you see. The only difference between the art world was that I, and maybe one or two other people -- John Wilson, for instance, was active in those days and he was turning out his social comment -- in fact, social comment painting was important in those days, you see. And we were interested in that aspect of making a statement rather than just art for art's sake.

RB: Were you doing that sort of thing yourself?

CB: Oh, as far as I know, thinking about those other things, yes. I think so. I wasn't just painting still life. But I've always done a variety of things. I've never done just one thing. I liked that sort of thing, you know.

[INTERRUPTION]

RB: So you were first exhibiting, according to your record at least, in Boston at the Institute of Modern Art 1943 and again in 1944. How did that come about? Did they come to look at your work or did you go to them?

CB: I have no idea. Let's see now, I don't remember exactly how that happened. It may have been through Lawrence Kupferman. Now Lawrence Kupferman was pretty famous around Boston at the time. He was a dedicated modernist and that's what attracted me to him. He was also very friendly. He would have some of the students over to his house and he also sort of kept in touch with the students after they graduated. And after I graduated and went to the Navy Yard --

RB: Was he a teacher too?

CB: He came in for a short time at Mass Art when Philbrick had an accident. And then he took Philbrick's place for maybe six months and was such a change to the kinds of teachers we had there that our group, if I can characterize them as that, took to him immediately. He was highly excitable, very emotional and would yell and point and make outlandish statements which none of us believed but we all were sort of attracted to this of exuberance. Very ebullient kind of guy. Okay, so we didn't agree with him, but he was provocative. And that still remains my relationship with Lawrence Kupferman. Okay, one of the things he did was he liked the kind of thing that I was doing and he was interested, as other people were in the fact that I was using the Navy Yard as a source and remembering the things and making drawings of them. And I was also doing this in relation to the political activities I had at the time. So he may have been the one who suggested that I show some work to -- I didn't arrange, I'm sure, but somebody else did. And I took them down there and they selected some of these and they put them in the exhibition. And the interesting thing was that Laurence Kupferman did not like the fact that I was using white paint to correct the pen and ink drawings. I felt it was quite valid and he did not. I was also using a spatter technique rather than a shading technique, which I thought was more contemporary, because George Grosz was using it. And that I thought helped to get across the kind of vigor and rawness that I found at the Navy Yard and was trying to get into my drawings. Oh, the good thing about that was that from that show I got reproduced in Art News, which I thought was fantastic! You know, it was a magazine I had admired for years, and there I was, reproduced in Art News. Yeah.

RB: What sort of a show was it that you were in? Was this a show of young artists?

CB: I don't know exactly what the show what the show was. I don't remember just what the theme was.

RB: Do you recall that you stood out as quite modernist in the show?

CB: No, there were people like Dick Boise [phon. sp.], who was just as modern as I was, in a sense. He used the raggedy line sort of thing, you know. No, I don't know, I was just so pleased to be in that as like a pinnacle at that time, you know. I hadn't done anything as important as that, you know. And the rest of it sort of disappeared. I remember some of the people in the show, but I mean I was pleased to be there and pleased to have this work that I was doing right at that time shown.

RB: A piece was reproduced. Did you get any other reactions?

CB: Well, no. The worst thing that happened was that a fellow by the name of Sarley [phon. sp.] came by my studio sometime later, having seen the things there, and said that he was going to New York, and wanted to represent me and could I lend him some things to take down. And I said, sure, I was very happy about that. And he gave me a phoney address over in Brookline, because when I tried to check on him he never had been there and he just took the things and stole them and I have never seen them since.

RB: So that was a very embittering experience.

CB: You have your ups and downs.

RB: Did Kupferman encourage you to show?

CB: Yeah, Kupferman was very encouraging, generally speaking. He and I disagreed on lots of things but we were sort of -- we understood each other.

RB: He objected to your using white paint and he didn't like the spatter?

CB: Yeah, and he also objected to some of my other techniques, which I thought -- I guess his feeling was that my way of doing it was primarily picking up some superficial thing from somebody and using it, rather than having it grow out of myself. And that's been a problem with me my whole life, you know. If I fall in love with the way George Grosz draws, or the way somebody does something, I'll just do it. And then hope it becomes integrated, and if it doesn't, tough, and go on to something else.

RB: What did Kupferman encourage you? Did he point out to you what he thought your strengths were? Do you

recall? Did you get encouragement there?

CB: No, he didn't encourage me that way. He just encouraged me to be an artist. He didn't so much encourage me as to how to draw. He certainly didn't want me to draw or paint the way he did. No, he was all for, you know, art for art's sake and impractical art -- you are not supposed to prostitute it by doing Time covers or anything of that sort. He wanted his students and people he knew to be pure artist, you might say. Which was good. This is what you need every once in a while, you know.

RB: When you got out of the Navy Yard hitch, that's when, as you mentioned, through Alston getting shown in Mirski's gallery.

CB: That's right.

CB: And was that just as a special showing or a group show?

CB: No, I became one of his stable, see, and I became one of the people. He would have, you know, two rooms as usual, in one room he would have like one piece of everybody. In the other room, he'd have either a show of an individual, a one man show, or a show from the outside, you know, some Mexicans or something. Mirski was a great guy too. He used to make frames and give them to us very cheaply. And he also liked hanging around with young people and talking to them, you know. He was very good.

RB: Would he help you out if you . . . ?

CB: Oh, you mean financially?

RB: You had a job, so . . . .

CB: No, I never was in a position to have to, and I probably wouldn't. But no, he didn't -- I didn't make any money at this. I may have sold a few things. No, it's really just being an artist. It had very little to do with that.

RB: You didn't get to know any of the collectors. There were some, probably, that Mirski was cultivating.

CB: That's right, and a few of them may have bought some of the things that I sold. See, when I first started out I didn't keep very careful records. It developed over the years that I began to keep them. Now, you know, I put down the name of the person who bought it if I know it, this sort of thing. And that's one of the things that Sarley taught me, you see. I mean by being cheated, I was, you know, I was pulled up short. And after that I began to be a bit more careful. But, you know, I guess I just didn't think that Mirski would do something like that, which he didn't. I gradually built up a slide file and then a file of cards and wrote things down. You learn by doing.

RB: That same year, '46, then, you were written up in Art News by Frederick White in an article called "New England." That's where there was an illustration of one of your pieces.

CB: Yes. And that was one of the pieces of the Navy Yard series that was used, reproduced, and I thought I had made it by then. It was only up from there on in.

RB: Because you've said that this was a very prestigious thing. I mean, Art News was the leading magazine.

CB: I felt. Oh yeah. And also Frederick White, who was one of the people from the gallery world who was friendly without being condescending to neophytes and people just getting out of art school. The younger people, you know. He talked to us rather than down to us as many other people did.

RB: Un huh. And did you get to know him a bit?

CB: No, I just, you know, talked a little bit maybe at an opening or something like that but I didn't get to know him particularly. Not the way, let's say, I knew Kupferman or Mirski or some of the other people.

RB: Did you go to openings quite a bit?

CB: Oh yeah, we'd go to openings, find people to go with and go there and stand around and drink the sherry, you know. That's about all you get there. But, yeah, anytime I was off I went to them, yeah. I used to go to openings much more then that I do now. I sort of ignore them now.

RB: Would you get to know a certain crowd of collectors and all who came to openings of new artists?

CB: No, I didn't get to know collectors unfortunately. The only people I got to know were students, you know. I didn't get to know the upper echelon of collectors or even the important artists. No. We'd get to know somebody who knew somebody else but it wasn't that sort of thing. It's almost as though we went mostly to look at the art,

which I know isn't the thing to do, but it's what we seemed to do.

RB: And an opening was a good, congenial time to look at art.

CB: Oh, sure. And talk to people and see people you know. Meet people you didn't know before.

RB: Did you get to know any of the dealers at that time, like Margaret Brown, who was starting up about then?

CB: Well, I knew who she was. And I also knew her framemaker, who was Charlie Harris, and Charlie Harris was Leon Braithwaite's mentor and I know Leon Braithwaite well now, that sort of thing. And you know Margaret Brown was friendly enough. She had a gallery person working with her, but you know just to sort of get to know them. I didn't know them at all intimately. I did know who they were, let's put it that way. There were a few people who had big houses on Beacon Street who were collectors and one of them was named Starr, and another one . . . . Some of us may have -- I have been to about three people's houses to look at their collections but I wouldn't call it getting to know the people.

RB: Was that an exciting thing too?

CB: Oh, it was great, my goodness. Getting to see some of those rich people's houses. Wow, you know, it was great. We were very pleased.

RB: What did that do to your socialist politics?

CB: Well, it just made me know that it wasn't for me, you know. I mean, they had the money and I would never have it, that sort of thing, but no, it didn't emphasize it any more.

RB: You were also in '46 written up in two papers, perhaps they're weeklies, the Beacon Hill News and the Boston Chronicle. Do you recall those, and what was the reason for the writeups?

CB: Well, the Beacon Hill News was also through Boris Mirski and a show that I had there. I did have a one-man show at Boris Mirski's and the Boston Chronicle is a black paper, called "colored paper" in those days, or Negro press, I guess. And that was a matter of what I was doing in relation to the USO. Now at the time, while I was in the Navy Yard and maybe after, I also used to draw service men. I used to go to the hospitals and draw them and I would go to the USO and draw them. There was a big USO in Dudley Street near the DUdley Station, where I used to go quite frequently. I don't really know how often I went. And I'd do the same thing you know, make sketches of people and give them to them and then make sketches of them for myself and make big drawings from those. And now that I think of it, I don't really know whether I went like every week or once a month or how many times I went totally. But it's just part of what I did do at one time. And I got written up for doing that because at that time I had been on the home front, sort of thing. You know, I was 4F and had bad eyes and so I never actually went into the service. So I used that as my contribution.

RB: In '47 you had two outside shows. One was at the Addison Gallry of Art in Andover. How did that come about? What sort of show was that?

CB: That came through the Mass College of Art. I think, let's see, Gordon Reynolds was president at the time. And evidently Bartlett Hayes had an idea that he wanted to show the work of fairly recent graduates from a series of about six art schools, and so my assumption is that many of the people running the schools would ask certain graduates to come to see them or submit things or show them things if they'd go to their studio. Then they'd pick one to represent that particular school and we had big show out there. I was very pleased to be the one picked from Mass Art. I showed watercolors, and they were primarily street scenes and things that people -- genre paintings -- and people carrying placards protesting things. I had been in a law suit for having been discriminated against in a restaurant and in the roller skating rink that later became WGBH, in Cambridge across from MIT. That's there, the building there, and a bunch of us went up there to go roller skating one time and when we were up there said, oh, no, it's all full, you can't come in. So as we started to go away -- there were about six of us, three couples, boys and girls -- and then we saw some white people come up and they walked right in. Then we went back and said, "We thought you said it was filled," or however they phrased it. And they said, "Well, those are just friends of ours," and they gave us some phoney excuses. And at the time we were involved with the youth group of the NAACP. And we said, "Well, this doesn't seem quite right. We are going to do something." Of course, we had been involved in this and read about a lot of other things, so we got a lawyer and went to court and won the case and closed the place down. And they went out of business and then WGBH took over. And that was kind of exciting. And there was a civil rights lawyer, you know, who picked up the case. I'm trying to think of his name. You know, it was an open and shut case. We didn't have a problem with the case. The judge knew what we said was -- and the other person couldn't give them any excuse for not letting us in, so . . . .

RB: And there were laws in this state by then?

CB: I'm not exactly sure what the legal basis was. I think there -- well it was never legal to discriminate in public places in Massachusetts, any more than since, I think, about 1830. It was the laws concerning public education. I think it was in 1830 that they outlawed segregated schools in Boston. So Boston wasn't segregated legally. They didn't have de juro segregation, generally speaking, in Boston, Massachusetts. You always had the case if you fought it.

RB: Were you somewhat involved in the NAACP during these years?

CB: Yeah, I was involved in these kinds of things

[END TAPE 1, SIDE B]

TAPE 2, SIDE A

RB: Were you somewhat involved in the NAACP during these years?

CB: Yeah, I was involved in these kinds of things. I was very much interested in the Stage. As I said to you earlier, there was a leftist group of the Stage called Stage for Action that put on plays during the war and there are some other groups. I picketed an insurance company; Falvey [phon. sp.] was the person that we were picketing. I remember that on the sign. I'm not exactly sure what these dates were but it all tied in with the general racial situation. You know, to go back historically, a lot of blacks moved north out of the South because there were jobs in the defense plants. Also the soldiers came primarily from the South and when they came to Boston they would mingle with the people who were here and we'd learn a lot more than we would know otherwise. And the war was a means of changing things. Upheaval, moving people around, travel -- which was one of the things I missed by not getting into service, you know, like going someplace other than being in Boston.

RB: But you were in a place to which a lot of outside influences came?

CB: Oh, yeah.

RB: Particularly during the war?

CB: Un huh. And I was active socially. You know, I was out all the time. I didn't stay home at all. I was hanging around with somebody and going to the movies or going someplace. And going to dances, and working. I lived at home but I didn't stay home very much.

RB: Was this work picketing and other things you did quite risky in Boston?

CB: No. It wasn't even risky to complain about the discrimination. There weren't any riots or fire bombings as far as I can remember.

RB: It wasn't as hostile as it is today?

CB: Oh, by no means. It was by no means as hostile. No, we could walk around in Charlestown and not be at all afraid, you know. I wouldn't do it now. And the whites were all over Roxbury too, you see. There were the conscientious objectors, for instance, who were a part of all of this. I had a couple of friends there who were friends of, you know, girlfriends, friends of friends. This whole social-political part was almost recreation. You know, something to do to have fun. And as far as I can see, I never felt that there was risk at all. I probably wouldn't have done it if I had. [chuckle]

RB: Well, you were also then beginning. . . . That same year, 1947, you had an exhibition at Atlanta University. How would that come about? Through suggestion? Or somebody contacted you, or. . .?

CB: Yes, I think something like that happened. Margaret Brown was involved in that because the person who contributed the money from which they gave the prizes in Atlanta was somehow connected with Margaret Brown, Margaret Brown Gallery. And it was not at all, of course, unusual for northern philanthropist to give money and this sort of thing to the Southern colleges. And the interesting thing about Atlanta was that just about every year that I entered it, I won a prize of some sort. A purchase prize, that sort of thing. It was very successful for me. And that's somewhat similar to Jordan Marsh, when I used to enter those. I would win prizes there. So Atlanta was very important in getting a group of black artists to exhibit, to win prizes, to sell their things and then get the great Atlanta collection. And I was pleased to be a part of that whole group. I have several things there, and they have sent their things on exhibition.

RB: Atlanta University was quite an important window for you, even in those days?

CB: Yeah.

RB: There was a lot of philanthrophical interest and these people in the liberal community would talk it up, et cetera.

CB: That was publicity. Oh, sure. You know it's an exhibition outside of your own home town, that's all. I was quite pleased with that one.

RB: Looking at your work, these drawings are quite lyrical, aren't they, fairly expressionistic?

CB: I think that's what I was trying for. Un huh.

RB: And you had no particular model in mind, did you? These are mostly memory ones. There were just some observed.

CB: Oh, I would have looked at those people, you see, and I would have said to myself, "That person has on those kind of pants and the leg is this size, his shoe is turned up and a hat. . ." And then I would actually memorize those things and then come home and draw them. So that it's just one step away from being observed. I was trying to make them as exact as possible except for chiaroscuro, light and shade. But the line drawings are supposed to be naturalistic and expressive.

RB: And yet the facial expressions and sometimes the postures are rather suggestive or expressive. I mean, here we have a couple, a man scowling and the woman has a very long neck. I'm wondering what you had in mind.

CB: That's me and my girlfriend at the time.

RB: Oh. So there's something beyond mere literal recording.

CB: Oh yes, I was so in love with her, wow! Oh sure, she was a great girl. She loved jazz, played the violin, she went to Simmons ,and she finally married a white fellow and I married a white girl. And he was a person who presented jazz. I saw her brother the other day, and -- of course, she's old now but she is living in Paris. She made it. A very bright person.

RB: That's really not a typical one from the selection I've seen here.

CB: That is one of the more expressive ones, quite true.

RB: But in looking at some of these others, another one or two here -- well, this one here is of three women, shipyard workers.

CB: Yeah.

RB: There's certainly keen observation of their clothes and detail, and yet the faces are, if not exaggerated, very distinctive. There's the one with glasses that looks like she's very talkative. Then there's the very chubby, rather happy and fat, one in the middle. Were you trying to get something of an essence or were you recording types, or. . .?

CB: I think that happened without my trying for it. You see, I think I was trying to draw it exactly the way I saw it and remembered it. And then the fact that it filtered through the memory and related to other things became of summary and an essence. So that was the uncontrolled part of it.

RB: But you've eliminated, in most cases, background. You concentrate on outline and certain details, but only ones that are rather expressive of dress or of carriage or expression. Are the watercolors largely of people too, the ones that you mentioned showing?

CB: Yeah. Not only are they of people but they could be watercolors of the actual scences drawn from the same sketchbooks and the same drawings in the sketchbooks. Those sketchbooks that I have up there on the shelf were left at home. When I'd go home I'd just draw into those and then I'd just go from those to a finished work, in a sense. And that process would tend to automatically generalize, very often, and also exaggerate the specifics, you know.

RB: This is a drawing probably at a USO. It's a couple dancing, a man playing the piano.

CB: Yeah, un huh.

RB: And they are very closely observed; again, very distinctive faces. Each one is a distinct facial type.

CB: Yeah. That actually is not the USO, but that one is the Navy Yard Band that used to play at lunch hour. And that figure on the right hand side down front is a back view of myself. If Norman Rockwell could put himself in his pictures, I don't see why I can't stick myself in.

RB: That's you with your goggles up and so forth?

CB: Not that one, but the other guy here. Not the goggles, but the one next to him with the Pope Pie hat on. That's the kind of hat I wore with the badge on it.

RB: Biggest guy in the room, it looks like.

CB: [chuckle] That's me. All five feet of me.

RB: This is the second interview with Calvin Burnett, Medway, Massachusetts, November 4, l980, Robert Brown the interviewer.

We just talked in the previous interview about your sketches from the time you worked in the Boston Naval Ship Yard, 1942 to about '46. In '46, did you resign or were you mustered out, or what?

CB: I was released -- I guess that would be the best way of saying it. And I immediately went around looking for some work to do. I had planned to be a commercial artist of some type and I didn't know exactly what to do. If you remember, I had graduated from a fine art course. And realizing, of course, that I would not be able to make a living painting pictures, I looked in the newspapers and asked people about the kind of work that I might be able to do, and found an ad for a sign painter. Of course I had never painted a sign in my life, but it just seemed to be something that I might be able to do. So I applied for it and it turned out that it wasn't really a sign painting job. What they were looking for was someone who knew something about silk screen, that is, the making of signs by the silk screen printing process. I started out just racking signs. I painted one sign -- well, I guess one or two signs -- and it was again not really sign painting but card writing. It was something I could pick up very easily. You use a chisled brush and you just stroke the letters, and it wasn't at all difficult to do. I got quite friendly with the foreman there who was in charge of the silk screening, and I learned it very easily, I hadn't had it in school or anything but those kinds of things are easily picked up. So I found that it was a way of making some money without being too concerned about the headaches that come from freelancing. I also wanted to be an illustrator and that takes freelancing. So the problem was, the very usual dilemma, how can I do that working at an 8-hour-day-job. So I figured the best thing to do would be to get a part-time job and do both. And I looked around and next time I went looking for a job I told them that I was an expert sign painter and an experienced silk-screener. This was at Gordon Buffert [phon. sp.] in Boston. He took me at my word and when he tried me out I was able to do the things he asked, so it worked out well. And then another friend of mine who was also an artist who was in the same predicament I was, he wanted a part-time job. So we teamed up and we both took the same job at Gordon Buffert's, both working half days.

RB: What was Gordon Buffert's business?

CB: He was in the point-of-sale advertising business, where you make the sign for where you sell it, and also various kinds of signs, various kinds of advertising. Silk screening, sign painting, and that sort of thing. So it worked out very well. Stanley and I would work either mornings or afternoons or Saturdays once in a while. We'd freelance and I took some portfolio drawings around and got a few illustration jobs with D.C. Heath. But the main thing is that I was unable to do any fine art during these years because the two jobs kept me very busy. I was quite active socially at the time. Hanging around and chasing women at the time. Drove a car. Even in those days everything was -- I was poor, I didn't make any money, but my brother and I got together to buy a car. So we had to share the car. So I had to share a job and share a car. Totally inconvenient, but it worked out all right. And I rather enjoyed those days. I think I was living on something like $37, $38, $40 a week and it seemed to be not a bad life at all.

RB: Where were you living?

CB: I was living at home, so that was a big help, in Cambridge. And my brother got married and left and left me the whole car. So that was some help.

RB: Of the work you did in those years, is there anything that stands out particularly?

CB: I can't think of any.

RB: What about the work for D.C. Heath?

CB: Yes, those were miserable kind of jobs. There'd be counting books, you know, you would have one pig and

two birds and three dolls and four balls, and that sort of thing. I was very pleased to get that kind of work because it made me feel like a professional but they were not the things that I would be proud of. I still have them in the portfolio but they are not really what I was looking for. I was looking to do big full-color things that paid a few thousand dollars, you know. Anyway, I'm trying to think of the kinds of fine art work. I really wasn't doing fine art work; I wasn't interested in doing fine art work at that particular time. It wasn't until I went back to art school later that I got turned on to the fine art. If I were exhibiting things in those days, I'd be exhibiting things that I had already done rather than doing new things. It was just a sort of fallow period, I would say, after the excitement of drawing those things at the Navy Yard.

RB: You did have a show at Boris Mirsky in '46, but that was the Navy Yard?

CB: Yes, those would be the Navy Yard things.

RB: You talked about that show.

CB: And at the time I was exhibiting off and on with Boris Mirsky. But they were the things that I had done up to that point, the oil paintings and the drawings.

RB: What about here in '46, you also had an exhibit with the Germanic Museum, now the Busch-Reisinger at Harvard?

CB: That was in relation to the Cambridge Art Association. I had joined the Cambridge Art Association primarily to keep my hand in and they had an evening class where you could go and draw from a model. And those things got into my sketchbooks but they did not come out of the sketchbooks until much later as pieces of art.

RB: Now here also '47 in Washington, D.C., the Barnet-Aden Gallery.

CB: Un huh.

RB: Was that again a showing of earlier work?

CB: Yeah, those were the earlier works. There may have been one or two watercolors that I did but it was not at all -- I can't really think of what I was. . . . Oh, I suppose there were a couple of social protest things. I was interested in those days more in music. I was playing the piano in those days. I was listening to people like Bo Denner [phon. sp.] and Josh White. I was active politically. It was after the war and I was involved with trying to right the wrongs of the world. I was quite leftist at that particular time and I suppose a lot of people were. And I was, as I said, much more interested in getting out of the house and hanging around with people and going over and talking and arguing and sitting around all night, you know, discussing things rather than doing actual art work.

RB: Un huh. Because you did do some social protest work?

CB: Yeah, but I don't really think they are some of my best things.

RB: What about Atlanta University? You showed there for over twenty years off and on and you got many prizes.

CB: That's right, un huh.

RB: Your first showing was in 1947?

CB: Un huh.

RB: What was that of? Do you recall?

RB: Yeah, I think that was a drawing called Parade. It was a drawing of -- it was a drawing done of a parade, from my sketchbook probably. And there was another one that was of blacks and whites working together. I remember that one receiving a prize. And that was done because I was drawing some of the factory workers who worked in the buildings around where Gordon Buffert's was. I probably could call myself sort of a Sunday painter. If I did anything I might draw something once a month on Sunday or something of that sort, but I really wasn't doing what I would have liked to have done. We used to talk about this all the time. You know, we'd say, why aren't you painting? You know, why aren't you doing this? And I'd say, well, there are other things that need to be. . . . I was doing a lot of reading and music and that sort of thing at the time.

RB: Things you hadn't had time for during the war or during college.

CB: Probably yes, un huh.

RB: What then led you to go back to Massachusetts College of Art? You went back in 1949.

CB: Well, that was because my eyes began to give out. My eyes are bad; that's one of the reasons I did not get drafted. And doing a lot of the type of commercial work that I was doing, freelancing, some of the things which had to be done the same size and the catalogue things really gave me headaches. And I talked to the eye doctor and he said, "Well, you really should quit doing that kind of work and live on a farm, get a job out of doors, something of that sort." Of course, I couldn't do that so I didn't. So I figured, well, if I can't do that maybe the other thing to do would be to become a teacher and then I would not have to do the commercial things. I would make a living and then probably be able to do fine art on the side. So I went back to school in order to get an education degree and I did that. I went to Mass Art again for two years and instead of going through fine art, I went through art education and came out with a degree. And started teaching in the Boston public schools. I hated it and quit and went right back to doing some screening and commercial work.

RB: Teaching in school was not good?

CB: Not for me.

RB: What was the problem there?

CB: Oh well, I can blame it on other people and if I were to blame it on other people I would say that, at that time, the art education that was given to the students was completely unrealistic. If we were trained for anything we were trained for the very best kind of suburban situations where there was a rather homogenous group of people who were somewhat motivated. With that kind of training they put us into the Boston school system where people were not only strange and different from anybody else you ever heard of, but they were unruly and they had discipline problems and they didn't want to learn. And it was a terrible situation. Seemed to have nothing to do with what I learned. You'd walk into the room and pass out papers and they would tear up the papers and throw them around like snow. You'd pass out some pencils and they'd break the pencils in half, you know. They would throw things. It was a terrible situation. I just couldn't control them, so I figured, this is worse than working. So I went back to work.

RB: It was really a bad experience, huh?

CB: Oh, it was a bad experience for me because I suppose it was the usual thing to do. They take the new people and put them in positively the worst situations and the person who had been in that situation probably moved on to a better one, you see.

RB: The two years of art education at the Massachusetts College of Art -- did that appeal to you?

CB: Oh yeah, I enjoyed that. I had a ball, yeah. One of the good things that it did for me was to change me from being the naturalistic, figurative artist that I had been up to that time, into a person who had a lot of interests in abstractions and experimentation and the use of various mediums. It completely opened up an entirely new area for me.

RB: How did that happen through education courses? Did they offer painting courses as well, or design courses?

CB: Well, it was the fact that I began to understand some "whys" which I did not understand as a fine artist. To be clear about this, when I went to art school, I had absolutely no trouble with any of the courses. I was what you might call, quotation marks, "talented" and could just do the things. I never knew how I did them. I could just draw and paint, I could mix colors and the guys I hung around with were the same. And it was a little different ball game than it is nowadays. Then when I went into art education I found that I was in with people who could not draw or paint and became teachers because they were unable to do the kinds of things that you could do in fine arts. Now we had laughingly always accused them of this but here I was in that situation. I found it was true and it was completely startling.

RB: You remember you saying how you people used to look down on the other departments within the college.

CB: That's right, because they could not do what an artist is supposed to do. So what happened then is that they began to explain these things by reading people like Lowenfeld [phon. sp.] and Arnheim and these psychologists in art education, Dewey. The people who write about how to learn, how you understand these things, where it comes from, what is the basis for it and all this. Then I began to see, wow, this an entirely different thing than I had known anything about. And so I began to get interested in that. I was not much of a you know, reader before. I began to read some, and say this is very interesting. So I began to do the things that they were talking about. For instance, they looked at children's art as real art. That the things that children did has some of the same qualities as a Rembrandt. And I said, wow, you know, I never thought anything like this before. And therefore I began to collect children's art and one of the big results of that is that when I had a child I just kept everything she ever did. And I have a beautiful change from the very first scribbles up to the some of the things

she is doing right now and her whole development because of my studying art education. And they talked about the way children develop and how they draw trees and what they are doing when they draw. You know, great, very interesting!

RB: Did your attitude toward those who didn't have any facility in art change?

CB: Oh, yeah. By all means, yeah. It opened me up a great deal.

RB: Because these were adults, not children, these people you were once so contemptuous of.

CB: Yes, but I wasn't too concerned with how I related to them; it was how I related to a whole area of art that I had not related to before. That is, people like Paul Klee, for instance, and the way he dealt with the media and the grids and the child art, and the art of the psychotics and what they call outsider art, was something I was very sympathetic to and didn't know I was. It fitted in beautifully with my political ideas at the moment, at that particular time, you see. So I then began to try to do what I was learning. And that was to be -- I hate to put it this way, but it's sort of -- to be something I wasn't. To be primitive, to be direct, to get rid of everything I knew and start over again, to make pictures that weren't based on Renaissance perspective. You know, I knew and could draw the stuff so easily. And I just started doing the other kind of things. And I knew that this was one of the things that artists did. And I'm still excited about that whole area. And ever since then I have always tried to do five or six different kinds of things rather than the one thing that I found came out more easily.

RB: You mentioned earlier the dangers for you of your sheer virtuosity.

CB: Yeah. Eclecticism, perhaps. I don't know.

RB: I mean the danger for you of those things at which you were very facile.

CB: That's right. I think this may have been one of the kinds of -- well just look around the room here. You see those things up there and you see those things over there. They are very different from each other and yet I love them both. I got a big bang out of doing them both and I will continue to do them. And I do all sorts of things. And I think that's me. I wish what is me was something a good deal simpler, but it isn't, so, tough!

RB: So once you got out, though, you were plunged into your first job of teaching in the public schools. Thereafter followed a series for few years of teaching jobs. You were at the Elma Lewis School. Now that was Eelma Lewis who was setting up her school for . . .

CB: I was one of her first employees. The first art teacher there, and . . . .

RB: . . . for the black community, it was?

CB: Exactly. That's right. And she had been teaching dancing for years and she just expanded what she was doing. And now, of course, it's the big center for Afro American art with a museum of its own and Barry Gaither [phon. sp.] in charge of it. Anyway, it's a big deal now but I was the first one who was not in the music/dance side of it.

RB: What did you teach and how'd you go about it there?

CB: Well, I was trained and I knew how to go about it, you see. Had I not gone to art education I probably would have been a terrible teacher. I probably would have not been able to handle the students who were not talented. Now I was quite prepared to do for them what I knew should be done for them and I think it worked out well.

RB: What results did you have, as you recall?

CB: Well, I can remember some of the pictures some of the people did. I mean, I remember the, you know, fruit scenes that I had some of the students do. I remember some of the active scenes that I had asked them to paint in relation to the noise and the rhythms that were going on in the next room as the people were dancing. Then we'd go look at them and draw action kinds of shapes with the brush, none of which looked like naturalistic pictures; some of which did and some of them wanted to have their pictures look as much like, as I recall, as real as possible. So I was also able to tell them what to do in order to make it work. So it was a good experience and I was very pleased to have had it. And I think I went from there to the Decordova Museum. And I was also working with non-art people there because we were teaching the required art for the Concord Academy. And there those students had to take art and they were doing things in relation to crafts and theater and printmaking and that sort of thing.

RB: Was that part-time, the Decordova work?

CB: No, it was a full-time job but the Concord Academy part was part-time, you see. And then when I wasn't

doing that I was also teaching the evening classes with the adults and the Saturday classes with the students and people who came in.

RB: Could you compare the students of the Elma Lewis School with those in the suburbs?

CB: First of all, as far as the kinds of things that I would give them and the kinds of things that they would do -- and that I think is one of the good things about getting down to the basic parts of what the person is doing in relation to art.

[INTERRUPTION]

RB: The basic pedagogocal method that you learned at college during art education you could apply to the so-called affluent or the deprived equallly.

CB: Either one, to adults to children, and I even apply it now to the pre-professionals at the art school. These are the people who are going to be designers and they have to learn certain kinds of things and you can teach them better if you understand what they are trying to learn, which is not necessarily just the technique. There's a lot more to it than that. I'm very pleased that I went through art education now.

RB: What are some of the things you are particularly glad you learned, apart from technique?

CB: Well, one of the problems I have at the college is that my enthusiasm for these aspects, let's say, discovery learning instead of doing it by the rules. If you are trying to find out how to use a medium or a pen, you can read in a book how somebody else used it or you can have somebody tell you how they used it, but since it's not, you know, medicine or engineering, you really can't make a mistake. If an engineer builds a bridge wrong, or a building, the thing will fall down and kill somebody. Or if a doctor makes a mistake, then of course somebody gets hurt. But if you are an artist trying to see how a pen works or a brush, all you have to do is take it and dip it in the ink and do it in a million different ways. So what you do is try what you're doing, try what you have in your hand and the kind of paper you have or the kind of surface you have -- just complete trial and error. But you have to do it in such a manner that you are able to use the best and reject the worst of it and that is what I call discovery learning. And it gets you a very personal relationship with whatever you are doing that feeds directly into what an artist is being paid for if he is a professional, and that is his uniqueness rather than his similarity to all the other designers, illustrators or letterers that already exist. I think that's the main thing.

RB: What's your role when you're attempting to have them discover for themselves what's good and what's poor?

CB: To tell them that it's possible, to give them the confidence to do what they think is possible rather than do what I said is correct or what some other authority says is correct. To not do the kind of thing that I do because I did it, but to do it because it fits what they are trying to do. It's a more personal, individual kind of thing. Although you can do it with the whole group, but you then have to walk around and talk to that group as though each of them is just doing something different and many things can be correct and very few things are wrong. It's almost as though everything is right in relation to some aspect of whatever they happen to be doing. That is, any kind of line you draw with any kind of tool is right and good depending on what you are drawing. It's like there is no such thing as a good color or bad color, or a correct color combination, it's only what you're trying to express with the color and what it's all about. You know, you go to art school or you go to school you learn all these stupid things like, you know, never draw with a ruler. I mean you walk around with those kinds of rules in your head you know. What in the world kind of statement is that, you know? There are times when the only way to draw the kind of line that's a straight line is a ruler. And I've had people tell me, "Never copy," they tell you. "Never use tracing paper." "Never, never, never." No such thing as -- well, I wouldn't go that far, but I think it is very rare that you should never do something, depending on what you are doing. So that's part of, you know, real life. You know, maybe you're never supposed to go through a red light, but boy you had better go through a red light sometimes if you want to save yourself from from hitting somebody or, you know. Anyway that's what I learned and it's good thing to use. I suppose I learned other things, but I'm not expressing this too well, but it's something that I do almost like second nature now.

RB: But having a student discover for him- or herself -- is that sort of a basic thing for you?

CB: Yeah, uh huh.

RB: And that is the best way they'll learn.

CB: For some things. The best way to learn some things. I teach such subjects as technical drawing, for instance. Technical drawing needs to have many things done in a very exact manner such as the way the American Standards Association is set up. And yet when you go through books written on the subject all using the same standards you'll find they do it slightly differently. Maybe sometimes radically differently. The making

of arrowheads for instance; the distance away from the drawing that they're supposed to put the dimensions, and all these kinds of things. And then you say to yourself, "Who's right?" If you set up a standard and somebody does it differently then somebody else is doing it wrong. Therefore, there must be a reason that it's not that way and therefore you can use that reason. It's more important for you to know the reason than it is to know what is right and what is wrong. One of the great things was, I used to study with a fellow by the name of George Lockwood. I thought George Lockwood was just about a genius, and I was a printmaker, and of course he was a printmaker, too. And he would come very enthusiastically, come in one day and said, "I now have the perfect etch for your stones." And so I and the rest of us would use that etch and it would come out beautifully. And so we would stick to that. Then he would come in a week later, "I have now got the perfect etch for your stone." And we'd take a little bit more acetic acid, a little bit more gum arabic, and that'd work all right. Everything he did worked but everything we did didn't work. So we, by trial and error, we couldn't get it until he told us how to do these various things. And I began to think that it wasn't so much what we were doing but the kind of enthusiasm and way -- it's almost the pace at which our hands would go across the stone that made the difference rather than the actual chemical reaction or the way the acid bubbled on the stone. Well, that's what I find to be particularly interesting in trying to teach somebody about art. It is a kind of a spirit, a kind of a confidence in your own use of things. And a kind of a belief, really, that is more important than the formula.

[INTERRUPTION]

RB: Well, we're talking now about your second time at Mass College of Art and the various jobs you had before your current one on the staff at Mass College of Art . During this time you met a fellow student and married her.

CB: Oh, that's right, that was probably one of the most significant things that happened during the second time around at Mass Art, which I enjoyed quite a bit. And I subsequently went back to school and took other courses and worked on other degrees. And I've just enjoyed school all the time. I suppose I'd go back there now just because it's such a nice thing to do, to have the opportunity to learn things in a formal setting. I suppose you're learning things all the time. But luckily I've got a job that I like so I don't need the crutch that going to school, I suppose. But anyway, after that I worked with the Decordova Museum and in the summers I would do other things. Decordova Museum would go just during the winter. One summer I did run the summer camp there. It was sort of an art camp. But they always closed for the month of August. And I did go up to Haystack during August.

RB: That was 1954. What did you go up there to do? To study or teach?

CB: I was teaching silkscreen at that time. This was the silkscreen that I had learned back when I was looking for a job and became a sign painter. Which is another interesting experience because when I learned that I learned it as a commercial method of silkscreening. And then when I was at Mass Art I had the opportunity to study silkscreening with Lawrence Kupferman, who was doing it in a very experimental fine art manner, and when I told him some of the things that I could do with it he was amazed. You know, such as register a red line against a green line so it turned from red to green to blue so that you couldn't see it. And so those are the kind of fantastic precisions necessary while you are doing commercial work. Whereas in fine art work you are just scratch it through and have the edges raggedy and be what they call expressive. Well again, I always enjoyed the fact that I had both of these strings to my bow after finishing it. Therefore when I was talking to people, those people who wanted to do a, you know, say put a tiny monogram in the corner of a handkerchief or you know make a five by six foot poster, you know, and if done in pieces either one can be done because the silkscreen allows itself. In fact we used to take the silkscreens and screen them on the sides of walls, you know, huge things, because you just take a pattern and repeat it the same as you could a block print and make as large a pattern as you like. So I was very pleased with that kind of thing.

RB: When you were at Haystack, what was it like -- do you recall? It was very young at that time, hadn't been started very long.

CB: Well, it was actually at Haystack Mountain at that time. They moved later. And they had places to stay, summer kind of cottages, which were very small and the kind of place that you could only sleep in. You had to get out of there and spend the rest of the time out of doors, of course. It had a nice place to eat and the setting was fine. A little stream and irregular up and down sort of mountainous landscape and there were some flat meadows there. And they had weaving and pottery and painting and all.

RB: Did you make some good friends there?

CB: No, not that I -- I mean, I don't remember any friends. I was just there for a brief time and those that I knew there and I have run into them one or two people since then but nothing permanent from there.

RB: Was this the first time you'd been among craftsmen?

CB: Yes. I never considered myself to be a craftsman even though I could do those kind of things. I did have sort

of a flirtation with it once in a while trying to again make some money by using the fact that I knew how to print on things. But I never really took. I did the same thing with the old art's festivals we used to have in the Boston Gardens. The crafts people would demonstrate and I would demonstrate silkscreening along with that. And I suppose I did other things. I've taught those things at adult education centers and that sort of thing. But no, I don't consider myself to be a craftsperson. I consider myself to be a skilled person but not a craftsperson.

RB: You see the distinction between you and a craftsman?

CB: Yeah. See, the craftsmen call themsleves artist craftsmen, the artist part being the person who makes the thing up, who makes that one-of-a-kind sort of thing. And I consider myself to do that as an artist, painter, draftsman, kind of thing. And then the commercial part of it is where somebody can give you something to do and you can do it for them. And that is a kind of professional type thing, you can. You can reproduce what they want done. And I consider that to be craft, but it's a skill, sort of more of a technician, I guess.

RB: Was there controversy in the art world about crafts?

CB: Fantastic, oh yeah.

RB: What experience with that did you have?

CB: I just took a position and stuck to it. I don't know whether my position was, you know, before the times or after the times or anything. But I made a big distinction between that. I've always made a distinction between the amateur and the professional, the skilled person and the unskilled person. The reason behind doing this is so that a person would be doing what is right and correct, you know. It's like, you know, genuine plastic -- genuine plastic isn't imitation glass. It's genuine lucite, you see. It isn't imitation wool, it is actual double knit. That's the position I've always tried to take. That a person who is a skilled technician isn't poorly trained or a failed creative person. And these kinds of eliteism and this kind of looking down on people has always bothered me. So I try to define these things as exactly as possible. So I can draw even a fine distinction between a technician and a skilled craftsman and an artist craftsman and the artist and all the hyphenated things, in order to be comfortable doing these kinds of things. I have a lot of faith in my ability to convince people about the stupidity of such statements as, "There's no such things as a commerical art or a fine art, there's only good art." Those kind of statements just drive me up the wall. Because there is a difference between these things. You know, there's good commericial art, there's good fine art, there's bad commercial art, there's bad fine art, you know. And commercial art is entirely different from fine art. The same individual, the same human being, is versatile enough to do both well. So you're not splitting people off. I don't know how long I should stay on this subject but it's one of my pet subjects, you see.

RB: But it was a matter of great sensitivity to the art community?

CB: Well, people took these stupid positions and held them. And I just couldn't stand them. I didn't bother with it.

RB: Where were these positions taken, in the school . . .?

CB: Everywhere.

RB: The Boston Arts Festivals were as controversal?

CB: Oh sure.

RB: Conservatives versus radicals.

CB: The crafts magazines would have editorals on these, and they were the ones who -- Crafts Horizons, I think, took credit for the hyphenated craftsman-artist situation. Which I think is a way out, but it doesn't really solve the problem.

RB: They ignored in the process the mere commercial craftsman.

CB: Well, yeah. No, what they really ignored was the fact that the individual person can do both and is not demeaning himself, you know -- prostituting his art, is one of those terms they use. That's what really bothered me, you see. That a person can work for somebody else and work for themselves, and be a commercial writer, and write the great American novel, and do poetry, and write advertising copy. This I think is possible and may even in many cases be desirable. So anyways . . . .

RB: And did you want to go on teaching? It was probably a necessity, you had to earn your living.

CB: Of course.

RB: So you got into the Massachusetts College of Art in 1956.

CB: Right.

RB: And what did you come in there as? A teacher of what?

CB: Perspective. The problem there was, at the time -- let's see, after I had failed as a teacher in the public schools, I knew that it would be necessary for me to get a masters degree if I wanted to teach in a college. So I sort of thought about it. I didn't have any money, really didn't have any motivation at the time, except the fact that it was a necessity. And therefore I didn't do it. But I did apply a lot of different places for jobs. I even put my name into a teacher's agency sort of thing. Trying to get just other jobs. While I was waiting for the other jobs I took the position at the Decordova Museum. That turned out to be better than some of the other possibilities that I had that I didn't even apply for for a while because I was quite happy being there. However, when the job came up at Mass Art it was because the person who was teaching the perspective course was ill in the hospital and if somebody didn't come in and take it within the week it would be beyond the half semester and therefore the college would not be able to offer any credit for the students, although they had been getting along with different people substituting. And so they wanted somebody to come in to finish that out. And so they called me. I said that would be better than the Decordova Museum, so I took that. I had to arrange to have somebody take my place at the Decordova Museum.

RB: Why did you think it would be bettter?

CB: Because it was an art school. Again the prestige of teaching in an art school is different from a museum, you see. And also, the fact that it might work into a full-time thing whereas the museum would have to always remain a kind of each time, each course, each year, off and on. You get hired by the year.

RB: Teaching perspective, was that something that interested you very much?

CB: No, it didn't interest me at all. I wasn't very goood at it when I was in school. But as I said, I had no trouble doing it, you know, I had no problem there. I had learned in art education how to learn things and I learned it easily. Not easily -- I learned it, but I learned it the first year under duress.

[Break in taping]

CB: But it didn't last very long. Once I had picked up that information I was able to go on with it. And then I got very interested in it. And the more I learned about it the more interesting it became. And then I became so interested in it that I began to take my notes and I thought I would write a book about it. And I did.

RB: Which book is that, Objective Drawing Techniques from 1966?

CB: Objective Drawing, yeah. This was way back, what is this . . . So I didn't do it until -- yeah, I used that as a project when I was working on my masters degree, I guess. And then I had collected these notes and then I -- again it's one of those things that sort of around in my mind. I didn't actually do anything about it evidently for 10 years. In fact, I'd go to the library and just read up on these things because I was interested rather than because I had to stay that far ahead of the students.

RB: What was it about perspective that interested you?

CB: Well, it was something that I didn't realize was so interesting. That's a funny way of saying it. But it goes back to what I said before, that if you have a kind of objective view of things rather than an intuitive way of looking at things, if you can see convergence and see vanishing points without people telling you that they are there, and if you can draw naturalistically, then you don't worry about these things. Then when you try to teach somebody else that and you say look at it and they can't see it, then you have to figure out how in the world to get them to see that those lines are straight, those lines converge, those lines diverge, those squares are distorted and they become rhomboids, and this sort of thing. So in going through the material to get people to see these kinds of things and to give yourself reasons for telling them reasons, you have to, in a sense, fabricate a whole background, almost a whole mythology, a whole kind of reasoning, a whole bunch of experiments that are well beyond just the little point on the line. One of the projects that I gave them because I was interested in it myself was making three-dimensional devices that would explain the two-dimensionality on the sheet of paper. And some of the things that people came up with were just absolutely fascinating. I didn't know (because that was the first time I had been teaching this sort of thing) what they would do and they did these things that just, you know, blew my mind. So I just got going. I said, how could they think of those things? And it was because they didn't know what they were doing. See? They were doing it the first time and they were unable to see the fact that, let's say, the top plan view and the front picture plane when turned on its side became a line; that is, the point became a line, the line became a plane, the plane became a solid, that kind of thing. It's just kind of interesting, that's all.

RB: Did this creep into your own work during these years? Were you beginning to do your own fine arts work more and more?

CB: Gee, well, I know I didn't do a thing that first year. [chuckles]

RB: Then you began showing these things to the Boston Arts Festival, for example.

CB: Well, I always had a lot of unsold work that I could exhibit at any point. From the time I started in 1938 in art school, I just built up what might be called a backlog or a good inventory.

RB: But at the Arts Festival when you were at showing your stuff in '54, '55, '56, these would have been new works, wouldn't they?

CB: No, they were just whatever I happened to have. You only need one; I think you only submitted one in those days. And, you know, I could paint three in an afternoon, really. On Sunday I could paint several watercolors. I could draw and I could . . . . You know, the big problem with an artist who is at all prolific is framing -- far more difficult than painting the darn thing. And the things just pile up. Nobody has any problems as far as I can see, that I know of, of getting a lot of artwork in their house, once they start painting and sculpting.

RB: You also in the '50s were in two exhibitions at the Institute of Contemporary Art?

CB: Yeah, those would have maybe 10 or 15 things each. And by that time I must have had a backlog of a hundred drawings, at least.

RB: You mean, of your work there would be ten or fifteen things?

RB: I know in one of those Institute of Contemporary Art ones there were several, yeah.

RB: And that was a fairly prestigious place to exhibit in the '50s?

CB: Oh boy, I was excited about that. And what was even more exciting was I got a write-up and reproduction in Art News. So that really bowled me over. Thought I had made it then; it was up from there on in. Well, it didn't happen, but I was very excited about that show.

RB: Maybe for a little bit now we could look at some examples or at least photographs or some drawings from the '50s and maybe into the '60s?

CB: Sure.

[INTERRUPTION]

RB: Now we're going to look at a series of work. This was a watercolor, right, that you did when you went back to the Massachusetts College of Art from 1949 to '51?

CB: That's right.

RB: And this is an abstraction. Is this quite a departure from anything you had done before?

CB: Yes, but it was quite consistent with the kinds of things that I was interested in doing and actually doing at that time. It is also interesting that . . . .

[INTERRUPTION]

RB: It was also interesting that . . . .

CB: That it was in a watercolor class taught by Arthur Corsini [phon. sp.], where I met Tory, who later became my wife. Now Arthur Corsini had been teaching at the college when I was there before, at which time I was painting very naturalistic things, still lifes and bottles and fruit, and that sort of thing, and landscapes. And now I was painting only abstractions, trying a wide variety of media. This one happens to be opaque watercolor in a very linear manner. But I was doing things with gluing on string and using gold paint and using collage and using washes on top of . . . . Anything that was not supposed to be done was what I would try to do to see what effect I would get.

RB: What do you mean, "wasn't supposed to be done?"

CB: Well, in a naturalistic, traditional watercolor method, you would paint from light -- that is, white paper -- to dark and you would make the paint lighter by adding water. And here I'd make the paint lighter by scraping and blobbing and blotting and putting on opaque color -- not even opaque paint. There'd be opaque inks and a

reproduction of white and just about anything that came to mind just to see if it would crack off or even stay on the paper. These have lasted now. They are just as good as they were before. I use very thin paper, very thick paper, I'd crumple the paper, you know.

RB: You were at that stage just trying anything?

CB: Right, un huh.

RB: You weren't trying to rebel?

CB: Who knows?

RB: Was Arthur Corsini much influence as a teacher?

CB: No, he was not in this particular aspect of my work. In fact, it rather bothered him, I'm afraid. He just knew that I could do it so he thought perhaps that I was not one of the fakers. A lot of the traditional artists always thought the modernists became modernist because they were unable to do it in a traditional manner.

RB: Which he knew from when he'd had you as a student.

CB: Right.

RB: Well, did you look at this -- was this a particularly tormented time or was it just a very lively period, or what?

CB: Well, I was having fun and I don't know what the painting says I felt, you know. It looks as though I felt -- I think it's called something like Banner or Parade or something of that sort. It's supposed to have the things waving in the breeze. I don't know what it is, really. But the good thing about abstraction is you do it first and put the title on afterwards.

RB: And that appealed to you at that time?

CB: Definitely. It still appeals to me.

RB: Let's see this next one here. [Slide projector advances] Now we have something that's still abstract. That's probably a drawing, isn't it, pen and ink?

CB: No, it's a drawing with something called a drawing stick, which would be a piece of graphite. They run about 4 inches long, a quarter of an inch wide, multiplied by a quarter of an inch. You grasp it in your fingers and you can draw the side of it -- those thin lines are running that graphite stick down on the edge and then when you see the lines swing out and enlarge and widen and narrow, you are turning it similar to a wide brush. It makes a very dark, very dense kind of gradation and that's where those large areas are.

RB: Well, was this done on your own?

CB: I'm not exactly sure. I don't think it was done as a class assignment.

RB: When was this done? A little later?

RB: Probably after I had gotten out of school.

RB: Were you exhibiting these things?

CB: Yes, this one I happen to remember was exhibited at the Block House. One of the people in Mass Art was Janet Dowd [phon. sp.], who opened the Block House as a craftsperson doing the block printing of fabrics. She became fairly well-known, was written up in magazines, and put Mass Art on the map for a short while. A good friend of ours. She worked in the crafts area on Joy Street there behind the theater. She had a studio there, then she went up to Arlington Street and had a studio. We went to the openings. She would have exhibitions.

RB: How was this sort of work received at that time in Boston?

CB: Well, probably no better or worse than the other things I was doing before I started this. Personally, I don't see that it was received any differently. I didn't sell it any more readily than I sold things. Nor did anybody come along and try to destroy it or anything. So I don't know, it seemed to be falling on the same deaf ears as before.

RB: This was something that you were doing pretty much on your own. This was before you did then go to Boston University, where . . . . [Slide projector advances] This was another abstraction. Was this one done with the same technique?

CB: Same technique, about the same time. Looking for shapes and forms that I had not seen before and had not handled before. And I think these are quite successful. They are quite large, by the way. Much larger than that watercolor. On the slide you can't see a difference in the scale, of course, but . . . .

RB: How big would this have been?

CB: At least three feet by two feet. In fact, maybe even larger than those on the wall there, you know. The first one was about as large as those two together. So that's about four or five feet. Quite large.

RB: What were you trying to do with this? See what you could do with the medium?

CB: That's right. I liked those nice sharp edges, those crisp edges that come in a single stroke. And then the denseness that comes from many strokes in between.

RB: [Slide projector advances] Now here is a brush drawing of an infant. About what time was this done?

CB: Not too long from the others, about the same time. It's just that I happened to see my niece lying down in the crib. She was asleep so she was holding still. And I was interested in doing another technique that I was interested in at the time. And that was to draw on rough watercolor paper with a brush and ink and then adjust the line very similar to a way you adjust the line when you are doing a woodcut, and that is to paint white back up against the line so that the line is the result of both sides being adjusted rather than as a line usually is made, one stroke dark line on a white background. This is painting white on dark, but it still looks like a line drawing.

RB: But the white doesn't really seem to have that much prominence, by and large.

CB: Oh, the whole thing is white. You see, there's a lot of white in it, very thick white.

RB: But I mean the white strokes.

CB: No, mostly you can see them in the tie and ruffle on the front there. But the trick is to make it look as though it were not white on dark, you see. It was the contribution of Thomas Buick, for instance, in doing it in wood engravings where you can use a white line along with the black line, whereas the early medieval woodcut artist would have the line drawn first and then the technician would have to cut around that line to make it look as though it were a drawn line. See, so it's that same kind of thing being done with white paint and ink here.

RB: Did you do this because that technique interested you?

CB: Yeah, I think that's primarily a technical experiment.

RB: In fact these things we've seen so far have, in large part, been reflections of your interest in trying out new techniques.

CB: Exactly. That's one of the things that I got from going back to art school, you see. It has stuck with me even now.

RB: The love of trying out of different techniques.

CB: Just for the sake of the technique, yeah.

RB: In '57 you did some course work. You began work at Boston University studying painting, '57 to '60. How did that affect you, because you were already pretty well into your career by then?

CB: That's right. Well, that sort of set me back, I must say. BU at the time was very much interested in having its students work in a traditional manner. And I guess I was accepted because the work I presented was -- I knew that, of course -- was traditional. So I spent a lot of time fighting with them, trying to do more contemporary things. When I found that I couldn't win, I just did some of the traditional things to get through it.

RB: Who were the teachers at that time?

CB: Reed Kay, David Aronson, some other people.

RB: I see. And they were rather tradition bound, or at least they wanted representational art?

CB: Oh yeah, exactly. Yeah.

RB: And if you didn't fall within that spectrum they weren't interested in working with you on painting as painting?

CB: Exactly. That's right. Oh yeah, that's how it happened back in those days.

RB: It wasn't learning by discovery, as you were teaching?

CB: By no means!

RB: What encouraged you to go there?

CB: Because it was close and I was doing it at the same time I was teaching at Mass Art, so I could walk over and walk back during the day or during the week. And I could do both at the same time, that is, work on my degree and teach some.

RB: Now you were working for a masters degree?

CB: That's right.

RB: So you could more ensure your teaching position?

CB: That's right, oh yeah, definitely. It was one of the required qualifications. That's right.

RB: So it set you back in terms of the time and constraints put upon you?

CB: And money.

RB: Yeah.

CB: That's right. Well, I don't mean it set me back, it just let me go in two directions at the same time. Because I did learn some things there and one of the slides coming up is a direct result of the kinds of things that I learned there. Not this one, but the one that has the four part [inaudible]. This was one that, I guess, was just a traditional painting. The only thing of real interest here to me is the way I placed the whites in the picture which tend to pop out from the general tonality. The fish and the popcorn and the glass and the paper. Again, all of these somewhat symbols of various things -- popcorn is a food, the fish is a kind of divinity, the milk of sort of being nourished. And all this goes -- and the fact this is called Father and Son, and the son, of course, is nourished by the father, and the interest passed on by the fact he is reading the paper. The father, in a sense, actually disappeared as I did the painting, as though he may have died and then is retained behind the figure as a portrait on the wall. What actually happened was I didn't like the painting particularly and so I kept correcting it and ended up with it in that manner.

RB: Were you exhibiting these works in the late '50s?

CB: Well, I don't remember. I think that I would exhibit just about any place that I could. Any time anybody asked me to exhibit I always had a lot of work lying around the house and if somebody said have an exhibit or if there were an open show like Jordan Marsh or the Arts Festival, I'd usually submit things.

RB: [Slide projector advances] This is an abstraction, sort of geometric forms and dark gray-blacks on a nearly white background. What's the medium here?

CB: That's oil paint. And the only untraditional thing about this oil paint is that after painting the forms, I began to splash and drip and pour very thin paint on top of this so that there are running drips. That is, it was painted standing in front of the easel, then put on the floor and the drips were put on, and then I lifted it so that it would flow around and give those others kinds of patterns that you can see on the bottom.

RB: What were you trying to achieve here?

CB: Again another technical experiment to achieve perhaps form and space and near and far, and how the rectangular form could be varied.

RB: At this time were you looking widely at contemporary abstractionists?

CB: Probably, oh sure. I'd look at all the shows that were around in Boston that I could see and read the art magazines. I was completely influenced by all that and everybody, sure.

RB: Did you go to New York very much to look at the much wider offerings there?

CB: Yes, but not as often as I would like and certainly more often than I go nowadays. But, you know, I'd go a couple times a year anyhow.

RB: About from when does this come? What date is this?

CB: I don't know. Late '50s, maybe.

RB: What's it called?

CB: Wandering. This is sort of a stable shape to the left and from that stable shape, things are beginning to wander away in a very random manner. Completely unplanned.

RB: [Slide projector advances] Now this is what, a woodcut?

CB: Un huh. I was doing a lot of prints in those days. Why in the world I got into prints I don't know. Oh yes, I think I do know. There was a prize offered at the Associated American Artists at the time and they were offering the largest amount of money ever given to prints. Thousand dollars first prize and $900 dollars for second prize, and extra money for printing an entire edition. I had never done any woodcuts at that time so I figured well why not try it. Why not try to make a woodcut and send it in and the upshot of the whole thing, the reason I'm telling the story is, I did make my first woodcut, sent it in and won the second prize. I was very pleased with that and so I started to do a whole bunch of woodcuts and didn't win any more prizes. Not this particular woodcut. It was a woodcut called Neighbor, which happened to be a woodcut of my wife. But it was a big thrill to have the guy call me on the telephone and say, "Guess what, you've won second prize, the largest amount of money ever given for a woodcarving."

RB: When was that?

CB: Gee, I forget when it was, but it was one of those big events in my life. Must have been in '70, I guess -- no, '60s. No, '60, more like '60.

RB: What appealed to you in the woodblock technique? We're looking here at a seated nude woman with the moon behind her.

CB: Well, it was something of the same thing as in that child's head. That when you deal with woodcutting, you're dealing with two surfaces a raised and a lowered surface. The raised surface usually comes out as a line if you cut the wood away from both sides of it. And then the lower surface comes out as a white that can be reversed by the way you print it. But that's the usual thing. And so you just cut away. And I used old found wood and you notice that this one is not a perfectly square piece of wood. It's tapered somewhat toward the bottom. Then there's a hole at the top which I incorporated into the design as a moon, a full moon. So it's called Figure in Moonlight. And the figure came from some life drawings that I had done many years ago in my sketchbook when I was going to the Cambridge Art Association to keep my hand in after graduating from art school.

RB: You've mentioned your sketchbook several times. Do you leaf through them periodically when you are getting ready to do a composition?

CB: Sure. Un huh.

RB: Do they give you ideas of the . . . ?

CB: Yeah, that's what I use them for. You see, it's not just the picture. It's what happened and what I was doing and thinking at the time I made it. It's a great mnemonic, you know. It helps you to remember all sorts of things. It's like music or certain smells, you know. The subject matter of the picture is very suggestive so I can recall, you know, old girlfriends, events, tragedies, fun. They're like diaries, I guess.

RB: The sketchbooks?

CB: The sketchbooks, yeah.

RB: By leafing through, you might just pick up an idea or even a form from one of the those and work it up into something new.

CB: I now lament the fact that I no longer keep sketchbooks because I have nothing to leaf through for these years that I don't have a sketchbook. But life changes.

RB: Why did you stop keeping them?

CB: I have no idea why I stopped keeping them. I just stopped drawing in a sketchbook, that's all.

RB: In '63, I guess, you began taking some instruction in the great Impressions Workshop in Boston.

CB: Right.

RB: How did you happen to get there? Why did you go there?

CB: Well, that's kind of interesting you asked that question right at that moment because when I won this prize from the Associated American Artists in New York, I also had to produce a large number of prints -- maybe 100, I forget how many -- to be paid for and I made another $1,000 doing that. And in order to do this I had to get some help so I went over to a friend of mine whose name was Ken McKenzie [phon. sp.] who had a print shop at the time and asked him to help me. He did and I paid him. And soon after that Ken McKenzie died and his place was sold to George Lockwood. I had known George Lockwood very slightly and since I was already in with that group of people who were involved with that print shop, when George took it over I just went along with it and started learning what George had to teach and found him a really inspiring teacher.

RB: What was his background? Was he an artist?

CB: He had started with architecture and then moved into printmaking and drawing and I think he went to Pratt. Then he moved to Boston, and then was really a loss to this community.

RB: When he died.

CB: Oh yeah. The current Impressions is the result of his hard work.

RB: What was inspiring about him as a teacher?

CB: He was a great guy. I mean, he just used to talk off the cuff, you know. He would never prepare anything. He would just come in and say things and, you know, talk very spontaneously. And sort of make things up as he went along. A lot of fun and a lot of preposterous stories and, you know, far-out tales and stuff that you know you're not supposed to believe and yet you do, kind of thing. Great conversationalist. He reminded me of another fellow, a good friend of mine at the time, by the name of Art Wood. And finally Art Wood and he got together and the three of us just had a -- you know, that's the way life should be, having those kind of people around all the time. Artists who take life that way. Of course, they are both dead now and life is not nearly so much fun. I just haven't met people like them since those days. I guess you always look for the good old days, you know. That was much better than what's going on now, you see.

RB: But you went there fairly steadily for a couple of years?

CB: Oh, many years, all the time, ever since from the time George started until he died. Yeah, that was many years.

RB: What would you do typically, go in there with just a vague idea?

CB: Well, I would sort of hang around. I'd be there, and then sometimes I'd draw, and sometimes I would get things printed and sometimes I would just and shoot the breeze with the people there. If I had any time, that's where I would hang out. And of course, I lived in town at the time and it was easy enough to get over there, and depending on where I was working and what I was doing could get down there and so. A lot of people there, you know, people like David Burgess. Nice group of people there. He's dead too.

RB: David Burgess?

CB: Yeah, David Burger. David Burger. A lot of them gone now.

RB: [Slide projector advances] Now here we seem to have something different. It's a drawing, I guess, of several female nudes?

CB: That's right.

RB: What's this called?

CB: This is called Initiation and it grew out of the paintings that I was doing at BU working on my MFA. You can see it has that BU style of squaring off the shoulders and making the anatomical structure look as though the skin was kind of thinly pulled over the muscles and that sort of thing. Again, I guess I was just doing what I was supposed to be doing as a student working on a MFA. This is one of the many drawings that I did along that line. And then I made paintings from it and the only distinction this has is that it's one of the paintings that was finally sold. That's rare.

RB: Did you have an intention in this? Women touching each other, looking at each other?

CB: I don't know that I had an intention when I started it. I think I just started it from the models and from the poses. But as I got into it I began to, as I usually do, put other things into it, you know, read other things into it

and then try to make the picture relate to those other things. I really don't know what it's all about. I think it has something to do with the women becoming much more conscious of their own bodies and I was, of course, interested in that. I've always been a women's libber and I am very pleased to have been in the forefront of that kind of thing. I have always been completely pro-abortion, and pro-ERA, and anti-right-to-lifers and all that sort of thing. So it may come out in something like this where the women are raising their consciences. They are interested in women gynecologists rather than men gynecologists and they are taking procession of their own bodies. They are showing each other about this, talking to each other about it, you know. That's what it's all about, I guess.

RB: [Slide projector advances] Now we have switched to -- it looks like we have a complicated mix of media.

CB: That certainly is. At one time I got quite interested -- I was teaching printmaking at the time at Mass College of Art. In fact, I was head of the printmaking department and I had access to all of the different presses there. And I used to like to take one idea and make a print using, let's say, the woodcut for maybe the color, and the etching for some of the lines, and then the lithograph for some of the blobby, splotchy kind of effects, and then print them all in the same piece of paper by carefully registering it, just to see what would come out, and then trying different colors and ways of doing it, and pressures. This is just one of that whole series of mixed media, mixed printing kinds of things.

RB: Did you also have an intention here beyond seeing what the techniques could do together?

CB: Well, see, less so. Ever since I got interested in just drawing and discovering things, I would discover what was happening as it went along. For instance, I think at one point I did not know whether that was a male or female figure. It was just a figure. And I did not know whether that was a landscape or whether that was a window, but I just kept doing things. And it looks now like a female figure, sort of in profile. The head's in profile but the figure is pretty much front view. And at one point I would not do that kind of distortion but now I'm quite comfortable doing that kind of distortion. And I think that's sort of a starry sky that may well be a landscape through a glass wall. I guess that's what it is. I don't know.

RB: Did you have an intention as to what effect you wanted to produce on the viewer?

CB: No. They can take it any way they want to. And that's exactly the big difference between fine art and commercial art. I don't have any responsibility to please the viewer. I have to please myself and if it is something that I am willing to put my name on and put out to the public, that's it.

RB: So they can take it or leave it?

CB: Exactly. If somebody commissioned me to do something, then I would try my utmost to please them, to put onto the paper the image they have in their head. But I also have the responsibility to try to put on the paper an image that is kind of growing and developing in my head. And these things happen to be in that line.

RB: [Slide projector advances] Here we have a portrait drawing -- it looks like a double drawing -- of a young girl?

CB: Those are two sisters. The one on the right is the older of the two. It was done on Thanksgiving Day. They had come over to have Thanksgiving dinner with us and I suppose I just wanted to see if I could do it still, you know, because I had been doing all other kinds of modernistic things. And so they were interested in sitting and we weren't doing anything else. It was a nice relaxed afternoon. So I sat down and drew them. Those are spots, by the way, just dirt.

RB: Un huh. And this was done when?

CB: Oh, '40s, I think. Is there a date on there?

RB: 1947, I think.

CB: Yeah.

RB: This is throwing us back much further than what we were talking about.

CB: I wonder how that got in there.

RB: But you do occasionally do this very careful line drawing.

CB: Un huh. Yep, but I know it was a Thanksgiving one year.

RB: In such a thing as this, what do you try to convey?

CB: Oh, I just try to get a likeness. See if I can draw it to make it look as much like it appears on the surface of my retina as possible.

RB: Un huh. And you do this sort of thing from time to time even now?

CB: Yeah. Most of the time I can't get people to pose for me, so I do self-portraits. I do self-portraits fairly frequently. Fairly frequently, what does that mean? Oh, maybe once every couple of years. That's frequent enough.

RB: [Slide projector advances] Now what about this? This is a completely swimming abstraction.

CB: Well, that again is one of those experiments. It's just a matter of dropping paint onto the canvas which is lying on the floor and using a mixture of lacquers and oils and turpentine and mineral spirits and oil paint and acrylic and various things and see what happens. You lift it up and if it falls off, okay -- and there's also dry color in there. That's it. It reminds me of some of the photographs that I have taken out back in the swamp where the ice has frozen over a period of time and you get little round sections in it at different levels. But that was not the inspiration for it. The photograph came afterward.

RB: About when did you do this? In the '60s?

CB: I've forgotten for certain. I should have checked those slides when I was putting them in. There are dates on those slides and you can check them. I thought they were in some sort of chronological order.

RB: [Slide projector advances] Here we have a much harder-edged abstraction.

CB: That's right. This was in my spray can period where I started buying all sorts of spray cans, automobile colors that had just come out, I guess.

RB: This was when, the '60s?

CB: Yeah, I think so. These are fairly large canvases and I would just tape pieces of paper onto the canvas and spray around the piece of paper, and then rip it off and put some other things in there. It was in a sense an introduction to the airbrush things that I've been doing fairly recently and I stopped doing these because I read that it was bad for my health. I used to do these out of doors in the summer so that I would not breathe in the spray. But I still thought it would be a good idea to quit, so I did.

RB: Did you exhibit these?

CB: Yeah, I exhibit everything anytime it can be exhibited, sure. I mean, I don't have any preference for one thing or another.

RB: What did you intend by these? Anything in particular?

CB: Well, I showed this in school once and there was one student who came over wanted to write an article on me. This was one that primarily intrigued her. And she put all sorts of sexual connotations in it. That obviously is a penis and the other roundish shape could be any of those organic shapes that might be associated with it. And then she went into a long dissertation about that and I said yeah, yeah, sure, un huh, yeah, that's very involved. So that may have been what I subconsciously intended. In reality, I thought that I was just making shapes. Cutting them out using whatever happened to come. The length of the shape would probably be controlled by the length of the piece of paper that I had in my hand.

RB: You would arrange these things and decide on your colors, wouldn't you?

CB: Well, many times the colors are absolutely, completely at random. I would just reach behind me and pick up the first color and spray it.

RB: Really?

CB: It wouldn't make any difference whether I sprayed with gold first and the silver second. Or the silver first and the gold second. It's a matter of being absolutely open and completely intuitive and watching it grow. So that you start with an empty canvas, you put something on it and then the next thing has to balance with the first one, and the third has to balance with the second, and at some point something tells you to stop and you then finish. And you can't put another thing on it without potentially ruining it.

RB: But by reaching for the colors at random, you severely restrict how you are going to complete it, don't you?

CB: Oh yeah, but there have to be restrictors. Already you are restricted by the fact that it is a certain size and a

certain shape. And you are already holding it in a certain position, either vertical or horizontal, and I already limited myself to black and red and whatever colors I may happen to have at the moment. And I don't know that it will be any better if I add another color or any worse if I add four more. There's no rules.

RB: No rules, and yet you sense that you've done enough?

CB: Yeah, but that's not a rule. That's what you as an artist are convinced that you are able to do. You know when to start, when to stop, how much of each thing to put on. It's an adventure, really. It's much more adventuresome, I think, than some of the traditional things where you set up the pears and the apples and the grapes and paint them. There's less adventure there. You know when to stop; you stop when you have all the highlights on.

RB: [Slide projector advances] Now what are these? These are rather arch looking.

CB: This is called Blue and Gold Blues. My titles very often come from whatever is happening at the time I'm doing it. I usually listen to music when I'm doing these things, or I may have just read something. What was the name of that last one? I think it was called You and Me. So this one is called Blue and Gold Blues, primarily because the cloth that I swished over was blue and the paint that I was using was gold and it was a blue and gold march, I think by Sousa. So it's Blue and Gold Blues because the B and the B's sounded euphonious enough to use as a title. This is a result of my getting a large quantity of stretched expensive pieces of canvas from a friend of mine who died and the wife did not know what to do with all his old artwork. It's a terrible dilemma that artists put their survivors in. People can't sell them and there's an income tax problem too. So they usually just give them away. And so I asked her if she minded if I were to paint over them and she said no, that's what she was giving them to me for. So I really didn't want to paint over them so I used the backs of these canvases. By using the backs I moved immediately into the three dimensions of the box-like situation that comes from this. So I covered this with pieces of canvas and cut into it and sprayed it and nailed things on and did a whole bunch of things like that. I liked that very much and I would never have done it if I had to buy all those kinds of things. And I haven't done it since. So that proves that it was only a passing fancy. I would like to inherit a whole bunch more sometime and have the freedom to just do it.

RB: This gave you quite a lot of freedom, didn't it?

CB: Oh sure. Also gave me a whole new direction to go in that I would not have thought of otherwise.

RB: [Slide projector advances] Now you have something that looks to me much more planned.

CB: Yes, this is one that came out of my sketchbook. It's called Four Part Black Political Poll. And it has the same four parts that a sonata has, and the same four parts that a blues piece has, 32 measures or something. And it is a result of improving those paintings that I had submitted in order to get my master of fine arts degree. In doing that, I, in a sense, did what I thought the instructors wanted and thus got by. But there were some things that after I really looked at the visuals were crowded with figures. And I began to gradually paint out the figures and adjust them. These were oil paintings to begin with, and then I began to use spray can and collage on top of the oil painting. These are things that would not have been allowed by the instructors at BU when I was doing this. And so the second panel there is just full of collage, and the bulletin board with that single figure dancing.

My thesis, by the way, for my MFA was two female figures dancing together. And this came from my watching Dick Clark, if you remember him, on the Saturday afternoon function where they used to have people dancing on TV and there weren't enough men to go around so they used to have the girls dancing together. And it caught my eye one Saturday. And I said, hey, seems to be something that I would be interested in doing. Anyway, I started with that. Well, you now see it as only one figure dancing alone, and to me that symbolized the plight of a person who needs the social work more than the others, so these four panels have now reduced themselves to being, on the left, the some sort of comment on religion because if you look out the window there. . . . You can't see it here, but outside the window there's a sign saying, "Jesus Saves." And then there's an angel taken from Giotto, and there's a sort of a black cloud of smoke that makes that angel become something that is not completely holy, in a way. And it is the use of religion against the oppressed peoples, kind of thing. And, you know, I can make up stories as I go along about all these things. And then the one in the third one is a self portrait, and that's an actual photograph cut out and glued on, putting myself on a pinnacle, sort of on a stage. It's almost as if I was preaching and I'm really looking at something there. And then in the right hand one there are a lot of slogans on the wall that have to do with women's rights. And there's one black woman cowering in the corner with a lot of space that she can come out into if she feels like it, but she hasn't quite done it yet because the women's movement was primarily for middle class white women and not for black women, and that kind of thing. And so all that is built into a painting of this type, which I think has actually improved it from the way it was when I did it. This was done over a period of many years. I just pulled it out each summer and painted a little bit on it for several years.

RB: This was done in the '60s then?

CB: It was done over a period of about ten years, yeah, so it was in the '60s. It was finally exhibited at the Brooklyn Museum in New York, so I was very pleased with that.

RB: When was that?

CB: That was not too long ago. It was about, ah, maybe about 1970 or so.

RB: And what was the response there to it? Do you remember?

CB: Who knows? I wasn't there. And it wasn't written up or anything. But I was just pleased to have it accepted, you know. I would like to have it, you know, plastered over the covers of an art magazine, but unfortunately it didn't happen.

RB: This then is one of the longest term -- or perhaps one of the very few long term works you've worked on over a number of years?

CB: That's right. I very often knock out two or three in a day.

RB: Would you think it was the social theme or the chance to experiment that carried much further?

CB: Well, I just got involved with it and kept doing and doing it until I got it right.

[END OF INTERVIEW]