Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Joan Brown, 1975 July 1-September 9

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Contact Information
Reference Department
Archives of American Art
Smithsonian Institution
Washington. D.C. 20560
www.aaa.si.edu/services/questions
www.aaa.si.edu/

Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Joan Brown on July 1, July 15, and September 9, 1975. The interview took place in San Francisco, California, and was conducted by Paul J. Karlstrom for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

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

Interview

[00:00:04.22]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, an interview with Joan Brown on July 1, 1975, at the artist's home.

[Recorder stops; restarts.]

[00:00:24.76]

Well, Joan, we were talking about how to structure this interview. And I think we agreed that it might be profitable or interesting to go back to the beginning, to your own family background. You were born in 1938 in San Francisco, so you're a native San Franciscan.

[00:00:49.90]

JOAN BROWN: Right.

[00:00:53.59]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: How long was your—what about your background, and your family? How long was your family in San Francisco? How far back does it go?

[00:01:03.77]

JOAN BROWN: Well, my dad was born in San Francisco, and his father was from Ireland. And he was born in San Francisco in the Mission District, right down on Capp Street, not too far from here. And his dad came over—I believe he came from Ireland to New York during the potato famine.

[00:01:26.27]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: From Ireland?

[00:01:26.90]

JOAN BROWN: Right. From Ireland. County—

[00:01:27.88]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: So your background is Irish, then.

[00:01:31.22]

JOAN BROWN: Only on his side. Yeah. And so then he worked as what was called a pointer. It was a guy who did this fancy work—the gingerbread, you know, houses.

[00:01:43.37]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Oh, really? On the Victorian—

[00:01:44.60]

JOAN BROWN: Right. He did all that fancy stuff. And he—

[00:01:46.73]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: When would that have been? Was that—

[00:01:48.40]

JOAN BROWN: Oh, gee, that was—

[00:01:49.37]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: When so much rebuilding was going on?

[00:01:51.50]

JOAN BROWN: Right. Yeah. It was the late 19th century and early 20th century here. And he built his own house down on Capp Street, which I never saw. My father was very ashamed of coming from the Mission District, as many people were at that time who got out of the Mission District and made it into the Marina or areas like that, which were considered one step above. So I never knew where. His place it could still be standing, for that matter. I've driven down that street many times looking to see if any way, say, psychically or something I could identify the house. But he built his house there. And so my dad was raised in that area and went through the earthquake, the 1906 earthquake. And their house stood, where other houses down the street didn't, and things like that.

[00:02:42.99]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: I imagine that provided a lot of business for your grandfather, then, the earthquake—

[00:02:47.32]

JOAN BROWN: Probably. Yeah, right.

[00:02:48.77]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: —with all the rebuilding.

[00:02:49.91]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah. But then he died young. And my dad didn't finish high school at that time. He went back later and went to night school. And then he joined—I believe he lied about his age and was only about 15 when he joined—got in the First World War and went to Siberia, Vladivostok.

[00:03:08.03]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Oh, really?

[00:03:08.72]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah, right. And which was interesting because Charlie Campbell, my dealer now here in San Francisco, gave me a picture, which is over on the wall by the bar there, of the baseball team in Vladivostok, of which he was the mascot. So he knew my father without—many, many years ago during the First World War in Vladivostok, not as a good friend, but as a little kid. He was the mascot for the baseball team. And there's Charlie, and here's my dad.

[00:03:37.82]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: What was Campbell doing in—

[00:03:39.68]

JOAN BROWN: His parents were mining gold in Vladivostok. And then after that, they fled to China, to Tsingtao, I think, from there.

[00:03:50.60]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: I didn't realize this. I'll have to do an interview, of course, with Campbell.

[00:03:54.17]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah. He's a really interesting man. But it's a small world. It was a funny connection. And here he comes up with this picture with my father in it, which I had never seen, although I knew he was on this small baseball team in Vladivostok. He's a very small man. He's in the back there—smaller than I am.

[00:04:09.65]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Really?

[00:04:10.16]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah, right.

[00:04:11.06]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Yeah, because you're not of the—you're petite, I think is the—

[00:04:16.91]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah. He was about 5'2" and was very, very thin until he got older. But anyway, then when he got back from Siberia, he came back to San Francisco and went to work as—I believe he started as a messenger with the Bank of America on Market, which was the old German Bank, and worked his way up to—he ended up to be assistant cashier when he retired. Stayed—although the bank changed, as I said, from German Bank to the Bank of America, he stayed there. At the bank, he met my mother when it was still the German Bank.

[00:04:53.43]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: She was a teller, or—

[00:04:54.96]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah, she came to work there as a teller.

[00:04:58.40]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Now, was she a San Franciscan too? Or did she—

[00:05:01.25]

JOAN BROWN: She was born in Watsonville. And her background, which is pretty interesting—her mother was Mexican. Now, they always went by the title of "California Spanish." Again, there was all that kind of prejudice stuff going on in there. But my grandmother was a Castro, and she was part of that Castro clan, which were very influential in the Bay area, as well as going down further south. And exactly when they came from Mexico, I never got it straight, although I have a book which I have to get into that has a history of this particular part of the Castro family.

[00:05:42.80]

But she was Mexican, or as she called herself—excuse me—that's the dryer—the California Spanish. And she was born in Monterey, raised in Monterey with a huge, huge family. And she tells neat stories about her grandmother, who had eighteen children. And I've seen pictures of these people, and they had crazy names. One guy's name was Pacifico, which is a nice name. They named him after the Pacific Ocean.

[00:06:12.51]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Pacifico.

[00:06:13.28]

JOAN BROWN: Pacifico, yeah. And there were eighteen kids, and the father died. And this—no, I guess it was my grandmother's mother, and what she did for many years—she eventually married again later on in life after most of the kids were grown. But for many years, she supported the family by taking in washing during the day, and then dancing at fiestas at night, and raised all these kids. I believe two died fairly—

[00:06:41.82]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: She got paid for dancing at the fiestas?

[00:06:42.63]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah, right, these fiestas. So she raised all these eighteen kids, and two didn't make it. I guess they died during adolescence.

[00:06:51.03]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, that's a pretty good record, though, for those days.

[00:06:53.26]

JOAN BROWN: For those days, right. And she raised—

[00:06:55.44]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: That accounts for the population problem now.

[00:06:57.57]

JOAN BROWN: Right. So she must have been tough. Anyway, my grandmother was raised in Monterey. And then she—oh, she spoke Spanish fluently. So did my mother, and all her brothers did. But as I say, they all went by this "California Spanish" and looked down their nose at Mexicans. I never thought one way about it either way, I've thought more about it in the last ten years than I had previously.

[00:07:24.28]

But she met—she was 16, on the beach—very romantic story. She was on the beach in Monterey and met a sailor, who was a Dane from Denmark. And he didn't speak English, and she didn't speak English. She spoke Spanish. He spoke Danish. They got together, and they got married. And so on my mother's side, she was half Mexican and half Danish, and my father was Irish. Kind of a goofy mixture.

[00:07:51.67]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: So then that then brings us down to you and describes your so-called blood components.

[00:07:57.87]

JOAN BROWN: Right, yeah. So anyway, the guy she married, she had my mother—let's see. My mother was about two when they came out for the earthquake. I guess my mother was born in either 1902 or '04. She had a brother living up here in San Francisco. What I'm—the point I'm making is how my mother and grandmother arrived to live in—decided to live in San Francisco, which was due to the earthquake.

[00:08:25.32]

Now, this Danish sailor that my grandmother had married was an adventurer. He was a wild, wild guy, and he was always going off looking for gold and mines and things like that. And he was gone most of the time. So in April of 1906, he decided—him and another guy decided they were going to strike it rich in Salinas to look for something or another. So she thought she would come up to visit her brother, who had a laundry here in San Francisco. And she brought my mother up.

[00:08:58.32]

And she tells the story of what happened during the earthquake, which was the brother left very early in the morning, as he had this laundry to go make—to do something. And so she was up, and she had fixed him breakfast and things like this. And all of a sudden, the earthquake hit. This was over on Potrero Avenue—again, not too far from here. And she said the next thing she remembers is the firemen coming to the door, and—well, she remembers going outside. Everybody was screaming, "It's the end of the world, and get on your knees," and all this sort of thing. Streets were splitting open—really ugly kind of stuff going on. Just hideous.

[00:09:41.82]

And so then the next thing, the firemen came to the door and they said, "Okay, we'll give you ten minutes. We're dynamiting this block to try and stop the fire from spreading. And we want to keep it here. We'll give you ten minutes to get out. Get your valuables." Well, she didn't know where he kept—at that time, people didn't keep their money in banks, or a lot of people didn't. Stuff like this, they kept it in their home. So she didn't know where her brother had his money and jewelry and this and that. So she—in a panic, she just grabbed things like dirty laundry and all this. and my mother. And so they went out in the street, and that was it. And so then she lived in Golden Gate Park for, oh, I forget, a few days, or a week or what.

[00:10:24.27]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Did they have sort of a refugee camp?

[00:10:26.72]

JOAN BROWN: That's right, in the park. Right, in Golden Gate Park.

[00:10:29.58]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Wonder where that was?

[00:10:31.02]

JOAN BROWN: I don't know. I'm sure that would be very easy to trace, to find out. So she lived in the park. And eventually, during the week she met up with—she found the brother, eventually. The home was gone. He had lost his valuables in this dynamiting because she didn't know where they were. So they were—oh, they found another brother who lived in a little house in upper Market right off of Castro on Saturn Street, which is the house I later inherited and lived in about seven or eight years. Sold it about seven or eight years ago, too—a little Victorian house. And his place wasn't touched. It was on a hill. So they went up there. Okay, fine.

[00:11:13.40]

Meanwhile, the husband, the Dane, the sailor, down in Salinas, hears the earthquake struck. He knows his wife and daughter are up in San Francisco. They wouldn't allow any trains going in. No way to get into the city. You could only get out of the city unless it was food, medical supplies, things like this. So he hopped a freight train to get in to find his wife and daughter, and he missed. And he was only about 22 years old or 24. He missed. He fell under the wheels, and he was killed trying to get into the city.

So then my grandmother gets that news, and then she got very sick, and she remained sick all her life after that. She never married. And she lived with my father and my mother and myself growing up. My mother took care of her. She was bedridden for a number of years. She developed arthritis very badly, and then she recovered a bit from that. She could hobble around, as I remember her. Then she got blind, and blah, blah, blah. She ended up in a rest home—died last year.

[00:12:18.50]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Just last year?

[00:12:19.33]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah. Right, at 90-something. She outlived everybody. Tough heart. Heart wouldn't go, but everything else was gone. But then—

[00:12:29.28]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: And then her husband, though—well, in 1906, her husband was killed—your grandfather.

[00:12:37.60]

JOAN BROWN: Right. And she never remarried, and got very sick. So then my mother had to—my mother and one of the brothers supported her. And my mother had had plans to go to college. And she wanted to be a teacher—history teacher, something like that. She didn't want to get—she didn't want a family life. She wanted a career. But somehow it never worked out. And so she ended up going to work at the Bank of America. My mother and father met and were married there—well, the German Bank. And then I was born in '38.

[00:13:17.68]

And after they'd been married for quite a while—because my mother was something like 38 when I was born, and my dad was five years older, and my grandmother was living there. But it was a crazy situation, because what—and my mother continued to work for a few years after I was born, until she got sick and developed epilepsy and all this. Most of it was an emotional disorder.

[00:13:42.85]

But what had happened was that my mother, never wanting a family life, and all of a sudden she finds herself with one, would never buy a house. So I was raised in a three-room apartment with my mother, my father, and my grandmother. And rather bizarre sort of situation, because twice they bought a house and put a down payment. Once was in the Marina, which, jeez, now that place down in that area right off of the yacht harbor area on Avila Street—jeez, that would be worth about $150,000.

[00:14:17.98]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: At least.

[00:14:18.55]

JOAN BROWN: So they bought a place for $8,000 bucks, and put a down payment. They moved in, and they moved out a week later and went back to the same apartment they had left in the upper Marina on Octavia between Francisco and Bay, because they just didn't want—my mother didn't want the responsibility of the house. My father didn't want to take a stand and put up with my mother. So they lost the down payment, and they moved out. Then they did it all over again a couple of years later, which was crazy, out somewhere near—in Laurel Center, now, out there.

[00:14:50.35]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Was this in the early '40s when they were experimenting trying to buy a—

[00:14:52.61]

JOAN BROWN: This was in the '30s. Yeah, this was in the late '30s and early '40s. They had—

[00:14:57.46]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Just after you were born, right?

[00:14:59.05]

JOAN BROWN: —my father made—Well, it was right before I was born, and then right after I was born. And my father made plenty of money. He was working well at the bank, and my mother was at the bank. So it had nothing to do with money. It was all attitudes and emotions. So then they did it again a couple of years later, and they bought another house. They lasted about four or five days in that one, again, lost the down payment, and moved—and that damn apartment was still vacant. And they kept—they moved back to the same place. So they had lived in this crazy three-room apartment for just many, many years.

[00:15:31.34]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: And that's where you grew up.

[00:15:32.75]

JOAN BROWN: That's where I grew up. And it was—I hated it. I absolutely hated it, because I never had a room. There were no bedrooms in the house. My parents—there was a living room, a dining room, and a kitchen and the bathroom, and that was it. And here they had plenty of money.

[00:15:51.09]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: And there were four of you.

[00:15:52.26]

JOAN BROWN: There were four of us in there. And there was a wall bed in the living room that every night my mother and father would disarray the living room and sleep in that wall bed, and then a dining room. Every night they pushed the dining room table—we never even used the damn dining room other than at Christmas—and out would come the wall bed. And then I had a little studio couch.

So I shared this dining room with my grandmother all these years, and I absolutely hated that environment. It was dark. It was—I mean, dark in a psychological way. It was crazy. So, see, there was there was a family life, but there was always the fantasy that this really is—this is only a temporary kind of situation.

[00:16:32.42]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, did they view it this way? Do you think there was this fantasy in their thinking that—

[00:16:36.80]

JOAN BROWN: Well, in my mother's mind it was. It was, "I'm going to get out of this situation one of these days."

[00:16:41.81]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: And yet, she was unable to do this, obviously.

[00:16:44.00]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah. Absolutely. Right. Yeah. So it was—

[00:16:46.67]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: That's fantastic. And basically, you—well, how did you, as—obviously—

[00:16:52.16]

JOAN BROWN: Survive, is the term.

[00:16:52.64]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: —when you were an infant and so forth, it didn't make any difference where you were.

[00:16:56.22]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah.

[00:16:56.69]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: But as you were in school and, say, junior high and high school and sort of comparing your living accommodations with your—

[00:17:05.43]

JOAN BROWN: I was very, very ashamed. And I made up for it in a number of ways, or I got around it. One was, I almost never brought anybody home. And I wouldn't have been allowed to.

[00:17:14.81]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: They wouldn't fit.

[00:17:14.91]

JOAN BROWN: No. You know, I never had anyone to stay overnight, or things like that. And so—and when I started dating, very often, I would meet guys around the corner, and things like that, or go into the building next door and say I lived there, and things like that—a lot of lies and things like that. But I also—

[00:17:34.88]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: That's very resourceful.

[00:17:35.54]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah, I was very resourceful. [Laughs.] But I also compensated, too, because as pathologically cheap as my folks were—you know, like, we had torn window shades in the living room and stuff like that, this really decadent—

[00:17:49.36]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: And yet, there was a very good family income.

[00:17:50.71]

JOAN BROWN: Oh, my God. It was a terrific family income, which was interesting because when they died, they left in cash close to a quarter of a million dollars, which I blew most of in about a year and a half or two years.

[00:18:05.75]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Which was compensating for all those years—

[00:18:08.04]

JOAN BROWN: That's right. But then there was the other, the dual thing, whereas, I say, I compensated for this insane kind of living arrangement by wearing very, very fancy, very expensive clothes. On one hand, my folks wouldn't spend a dime on certain things. But other

things was—such as the clothes that I wore was—oh, I had something like 35 cashmere sweaters, and all this and that. And I kept myself impeccably groomed, and I was sharp-looking. [Laughs.] And so on one hand, I had this image. On the other hand, I had this home life. And so all I wanted to do was grow up and get the hell out of there. That's all I wanted to do.

[00:18:49.67]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Did you—you obviously must have resented this because—

[00:18:54.56]

JOAN BROWN: Oh, terribly.

[00:18:55.31]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: —teenagers, no matter what their circumstances are, resent parents generally. And hopefully, they grow out of it. But this is an even more dramatic situation, and you must have been extremely disgusted with it.

[00:19:12.51]

JOAN BROWN: Oh, I was. And very, very angry, extremely angry. And again, too, I compensated—I spent much time alone. I was very resourceful in finding things to do. I spent a lot of time making paper dolls, which I'd never thought of, which now kind of hits home as I spend a lot of time painting or making my own world. So I spent much, much time making paper dolls. I spent an awful lot of time on the water on the beach, in the water, where I have returned to in the last six or seven years.

[00:19:43.51]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Where did you swim in those days?

[00:19:45.07]

JOAN BROWN: Aquatic Park. Same place I swim now. Yeah. Year in, year out, all times of the year. I didn't care if it was foggy or not. And I had kids in the neighborhood that I hung out with. On one hand, I was a loner, but by choice. There were a lot of kids around—friends, when and if I wanted. Then I didn't feel isolated in that sense at all as a child. I got along well with other kids and stuff. But I did prefer to spend, as I still do now, by choice—I like spending a good portion of my time by myself.

[00:20:19.59]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: What did you do with the spare time? You said that you cut out paper dolls and made things.

[00:20:23.23]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah. And I would make paper dolls for other kids on the block. And then we would have a story. Each kid would have a certain paper doll, and that paper doll would assume—which I would tell them what character they would assume. And so, as little girls do. Oh, and a dollhouse. God, I spent endless time and money with a marvelous doll house that—Kress's, in San Francisco, used to have the most wonderful, just row after row, array of things for dollhouses—food. And it was done beautifully—things made out of wood, and very, very fancy things. So I spent ages taking over, hovering over the doll house and dolls. I had lots of dolls.

[00:21:08.34]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, obviously your parents weren't cheapskates when it came to things like that.

[00:21:12.62]

JOAN BROWN: Oh, not with me. They wouldn't take a trip or a vacation themselves, and they just wore the rattiest kind of cheapest clothes you could ever imagine. They used to cut

paper napkins in half to save.

[00:21:25.61]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, of course, that's very admirable nowadays. In retrospect, that's good conservation.

[00:21:30.75]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah, but it was wacky. There was no consistency. There was no point of view, as a child, you could put your finger on at all, which—and then on top of that, I was raised to—they sent me to Catholic schools, which I hated even from the start—God, I hated nuns and priests and things like that. I just automatically revolted against that kind of thing.

[00:21:55.59]

And many people I know who are Catholics—my first two husbands were Catholics, and made a definite decision to break away from the church. It was hard for them. Many people have. And for me, it was no decision. I just automatically went to the services, did this and this. And then as I grew up, I just moved right out of that. And it had just been a duty all those years. It had made no impact on me at all.

[00:22:21.30]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Were your parents—

[00:22:22.82]

JOAN BROWN: Catholic?

[00:22:23.15]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, yeah.

[00:22:24.03]

JOAN BROWN: Again, it was yes and no. I was sent into Catholic schools because they had a bus which took the kids. And my parents were funny. They didn't—although the school was nearby, they were worried about me walking.

[00:22:35.01]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: What was it? What's—

[00:22:36.08]

JOAN BROWN: St. Vincent de Paul up in the fancy section in the Marina. You know that church right on Green and Steiner that—

[00:22:42.03]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Oh, sure

[00:22:42.72]

JOAN BROWN: —had this big, gold statue.

[00:22:43.21]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Yeah, that's a [inaudible]—

[00:22:43.88]

JOAN BROWN: That's where I went to school. Yeah. With the Aliotos. San Francisco was so—it was either Irish or Italian, mainly. These were the heavies in the city, and they were Catholic. And that was a very heavy environment in the city. They were all the top dogs.

[00:23:02.04]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: So through high school, yours was a Catholic high school?

[00:23:04.82]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah. I went to—I chose to go to a Catholic high school—I could have gone to a public high school—because a lot of my friends went to the school, and that was why I made the choice to go. And so getting back to the religious element, my folks did go to the services and things like that. But basically, I would say they weren't religious. And again, there was no point of view. There was no real—

[00:23:35.74]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, they did—they themselves didn't attend Mass.

[00:23:38.39]

JOAN BROWN: Oh, yeah. They would go because they were expected to go.

[00:23:40.48]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Yeah, I see.

[00:23:41.33]

JOAN BROWN: Their daughter went, and things like that. They'd go to say hi to other people. My dad liked priests. And also, living in this small—this tight environment presented problems, too. Because, as I mentioned earlier in the tape, my mother had developed epilepsy and would have these attacks in the night and things. And my father drank. He was—I don't know if you'd actually call him an alcoholic or not. But again, what does designate someone to be an alcoholic and someone [inaudible] have a drink? I don't know.

[00:24:15.83]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Nobody has yet decided that.

[00:24:16.88]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah, right. I don't know. But he drank himself into a stupor almost every night, and which I don't blame him for one single bit. My dad, I was always very close to, very sympathetic with, very protective. Jeez, my mother would fight him up and down, and I'd jump in, and I'd protect him constantly. But he was rather helpless in any situation where there needed to be some action taken. And my grandmother was half-bedridden most of the time, crippled with arthritis and things.

[00:24:47.52]

So very often, I would have to take over a situation when my mother was sick with the epileptic attacks and things. And that would happen any time during the night. And it's only been in maybe the last five or six years that I sleep soundly at night because I was always alert, waiting for this—and in this kind of tiny environment, three rooms, any—the slightest disturbance you can hear. So it was a very tense—

[00:25:13.79]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Yes, I would say—

[00:25:14.83]

JOAN BROWN: —a very tense life and very different than, as I said, Brenda [Richardson –Ed.] painted in the picture. It had the trappings of a very average kind of home, like Catholic, middle class, plenty of money. Not rich, but plenty of money. And so it was tense. And I had made up my mind very early, as soon as I got the opportunity, I was going to get the hell out of there. And I was always optimistic. The world was a big, exciting place. I didn't feel maybe as certain kids do coming out of or being raised in the slums or what have you—this is all there is. I knew that this was just one tiny bit of what there was, and that I just had to get through this, get of age, is what it was, and get the hell out of there.

[00:26:02.62]

And as I grew older, I became more independent. The home life was so crappy. My mother always complaining, which, again, was ironic, paradoxical—always complaining. "As soon as I can get on my feet, I'm going to," she'd say, "fly this coop." And I hated my mother. And we never got—she didn't like me either. There's—and to this day, even though she's been dead for, let's see. She killed herself in—

[00:26:28.99]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: She committed suicide?

[00:26:30.17]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah. She hung herself in that apartment—

[00:26:31.95]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Oh, Jesus.

[00:26:32.70]

JOAN BROWN: —in '60—let's see. My dad died in '69. Yeah, she killed herself six weeks after he died. All the talk, "I'm stuck with this goddamn drunken husband, stuck with you, you brat, stuck with my mother." She was always fighting her mother, who she chose to take care of rather than put in a rest home. And a very unhappy woman. Her feelings were right—fine, don't have a family life, but do something about it. Don't just spend the rest of your life dragging everyone down.

[00:27:03.31]

But what was ironic then when she did have the opportunity to make a new life—my grandmother was in the rest home; I'd been long gone; my father dies. She has plenty of money on her hands. Six weeks later, she hangs herself because she couldn't cut—finally, her chance came, which she talked about for always. And then she couldn't cut that.

[00:27:23.62]

So I had no—it was very interesting. When she died, I didn't cry. And as somebody said, "Well, maybe you shed all your tears years before," which I had. But as time has passed, I feel very—I feel sympathetic. I feel sorry. But I don't feel that so-called love you're supposed to feel for a relative. And I hadn't. That had been long-gone.

[00:27:45.96]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: I can understand.

[00:27:46.59]

JOAN BROWN: That had been shot many, many years ago. But this wasn't the case with my father. I think of him with very fond memories, and I miss him. I liked the guy. He was sweet. And he was weak in many ways, but who isn't? What the hell? So what? As a kid, you resent your parents being weak. But as you grow older, you find out, hell, you are too, when you're a parent.

[00:28:04.64]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Yeah. You look at your own. That's right. Well, I think as we grow older, we become much more tolerant. We can understand this. Did you—how did you find out about your mother's suicide? Did you find her or did somebody else?

[00:28:20.79]

JOAN BROWN: I knew—

[00:28:21.88]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: I hope not.

[00:28:22.11]

JOAN BROWN: —she was. Well, I chose not to. As I say, my father died. He died of a heart attack. He'd been healthy as hell. Jeez, even after all that damn drinking, he was—that he had done. He was very athletic when he was young—played a lot of handball. He was in very good shape. He walked all over the damn place. He walked rather than ride and things. And other than the drinking, he was really in good shape for his age. He got a little bloated from drinking. That happened as he got older.

[00:28:52.23]

But all of a sudden, I got a call one morning, and he had never been sick. He'd never been in the hospital, nothing. Jeez, I just think I remember him having a cold—a good constitution. And we got a call one morning in January, I guess, of '68. Jeez, I have it written on that painting down there. I can't remember. Maybe it was '69 that he—I think it was '69—my mother called us about five in the morning. She says, "I think your father just died. He's laying on the floor here." In the apartment in the living room.

[00:29:28.95]

And so I said, call an am—"put down the phone and call an ambulance right now." So we rushed over there, and he had died of a heart attack, just like that. He went like that. And naturally, she was stunned. And Gordon and I took care of the funeral arrangements and this and this. And I felt a big, big loss. Because, as I say, he was a nice, nice guy. I really liked him.

[00:29:54.65]

So anyway, then she got very, very depressed. And as I say, she was living by herself, and she did have this epilepsy, and she would black out. God, she used to burn herself with bacon grease. And she just was a mess all the way around—physically, mentally. So here she has all this, we found out from the attorney what her financial situation is. Get her all straightened out. So we say, "Okay, you got to move. You got to move out of this damn apartment house." So we looked all over and we found a real nice place up—we went to all those crummy hotels like Granada and all that stuff. And no, that was lousy.

[00:30:35.23]

So then we find this real neat condominium called The Sequoias up around Japantown on Geary and stuff, where you buy in. And that year, it was pretty good. It was $35,000 cash for the condominium. They have a doctor and nurse on call all the time. It's all safety devices. They have a nice social room. Sheesh, you couldn't have a nicer setup. I would have moved in in two minutes if I was old and decrepit and had the money. Yeah. It was nice.

[00:31:04.00]

We went through—just about to get her to get out the cash. The attorney said, "Oh, this is terrific. It's just right for her." Blah, blah, blah. She said no, she wouldn't do it. She wanted to go back to that goddamn bleak apartment. And she made out her will. It was a Thursday night. And—because I talked to the attorney. And I was calling her twice a day at that time and rushing over whenever I could because I was concerned. Naturally, even though you might not feel daughterly love, you're damn concerned and you feel responsible.

So I called her that night. And she was all right. And she said she'd made her will out. And I called her early that Friday morning. She sounded really, really depressed, really out of it. But it wasn't much of a switch from how this had been for 30 years on and off. Oh, she'd always talked of suicide when I was a kid, and constantly referring to suicide. She was going to go off the bridge. All the time, she was going to jump off the bridge. And she'd say, "Oh look, here's another one off the bridge. Well, I'm going to be next."

[00:32:07.65]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Terrific idea. Yeah.

[00:32:09.00]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah. Which scares the hell out of you when you're a little kid. Jesus.

Terrifying. So anyway, that evening, I call and she was out. I thought, probably at a neighbor's. That morning, I called her and there was no answer. And she was due at a bridge club. She had some screwy bridge club. And they called and said she didn't show up. I said, "Gordon, something's wrong."

[00:32:31.87]

So we went over. And I had always hated that apartment. And this is rather interesting, too. Gordon finds it interesting. As a child, I never spent one moment alone in that apartment. If my parents weren't home when I came home, I would wait in the lobby downstairs. I'd wait out in the street. I'd wait in the backyard. I never spent one second alone in that apartment.

[00:32:55.91]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Were you afraid of it?

[00:32:56.72]

JOAN BROWN: Yes. It was a black, dark, scary, like a Dracula house to me. And I would never be in it alone. And almost like a premonition of just things to come. Not really, not—it was that way whether somebody hangs himself in it or not, there was always the threat of that. Psychic energy.

[00:33:17.17]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: A sinister place.

[00:33:18.04]

JOAN BROWN: It was a sinister goddamn apartment. So when we drove up to the apartment, I said—oh, this was odd. Yeah, I woke up that morning and I felt different before I called my mother. I felt different. I felt something, a burden was off me, to tell you the truth. At first, I had a hard time explaining it. I thought, was it like missing an arm or leg? I felt different.

[00:33:40.64]

There was a—it was like a hum. A noise was gone. And I believe very strongly in these kind of communications between people, psychic energies, whatever you want to say. I'm not trying to be far out. I think at some point science can prove all this stuff the same way as electricity works and stuff. But I felt like a like a loud noise had stopped. I felt freer. I felt better. [Laughs.] I felt all these things. And I felt different. Although I paid no attention to that why. But I felt different. I believe I made the comment to Gordon. So I called and there was no answer. Then the woman from the bridge club said she hadn't arrived. We drove up. When I looked at the apart—we were outside in the car.

[00:34:29.98]

I said to Gordon, I said, "Something's wrong. Let's go to the police station on Greenwich," and what have you. And I'm very calm. And Gordon says, "Oh no, don't be silly." He says, "I'm going to ring the doorbell," and stuff. No answer. And then he said, I'm going to go—oh, then we got into the apartment. I wouldn't go into the apartment. And there was an envelope under the door with a key, and it said, "Give this envelope to the manager" in my mother's writing.

[00:34:56.50]

Gordon said, "I'm going to break in." I said, "Don't go in there, Gordon." I said, "Don't. You'll be sorry. Don't go in there. Something's very wrong. There's something you don't want to be involved in. Don't go in." So I talked Gordon into going up to the police station. We got a cop And we came back. And damn it, Gordon went in with the cop. I stood at the door. And Gordon came back. He said, you know, "Your mother's dead. She hung herself."

[00:35:18.29]

And I said, "I'm not surprised." I mean, I knew. So I didn't—I was there, but I didn't go in and check anything out because I knew this had been in the works for so, so damn long by personal choice. So that was the end of that. That was the end of the family life. The only

relative left was my grandmother, who had fallen down and broken her hip just not too long, maybe 15 years ago. And she had to go in a rest home at that point. And then she died last year. She was a vegetable. They kept her pumped up with all kinds of stuff. I couldn't do a thing. Can't do a thing about that, unfortunately, other than for yourself, state that in your will or what have you, that you will not have this done to yourself. So that was the end of the family life.

[00:36:08.83]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: That was your immediate family. You had no—you're an only child.

[00:36:11.98]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah. Well, my father's sister had died a while back. And she has a daughter somewhere down south here. I don't know where. We've never been in touch.

[00:36:22.45]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: There's probably a lot of Castros running around here and there.

[00:36:27.93]

JOAN BROWN: Right. But I don't know where. But as I grew older, as I say, I spent less and less time home, a lot of time on the beach, a lot of time in the water, then in high school. And a fairly active social life. Again, paradoxical things, on one hand, I was super protected with just crazy stuff. And on the other hand, I had total freedom. And I would come home at, my God, the city was a different place.

[00:36:57.65]

We would go to the movies because we were interested in boys that went to St. Ignatius [laughs] over on this side. We lived in the Marina, my girlfriends and I, some of us. And so then we'd go over here, out to Taraval Street, to the park side, to go to the movies to see boys. Then afterwards, we go get something to eat. And the buses stopped running at 12 and I would walk home from Fillmore and Broadway to run down that hill, run through Funston Park. And I'd get home at two or three in the morning, climb the fence, climb in through the back window and come in.

[00:37:33.41]

And so I had total freedom on one hand. And then little things, I just be totally held down, like staying overnight at other people's houses. They said, "But you'll get germs." And they wouldn't let me go to camp. And crazy stuff like that. So on one hand, I was restricted as hell. On the other hand, I just had this insane kind of freedom where I should have been clamped down on a bit.

[00:37:57.39]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Yeah, that was good. That's one of the things I was going to ask you. You've answered it without the question.

[00:38:03.26]

JOAN BROWN: And also, too, I became very independent, and I did most of the—meals were so tense around there. My father was just starting to get drunk usually and my mother was pissed off, and all this. I started eating out. And again, as I said, I had plenty of money. I wasn't even ever given an allowance. There was a purse of money in my mother's drawer. And I'd go in and take out $20 bills. I'd take anything I wanted. And I never had to answer.

[00:38:26.10]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: How old were you then? Is this high school?

[00:38:27.66]

JOAN BROWN: When I started eating out? Yeah, yeah, right. So I go down to the Marina,

to the pizza places and have my dinner. And then I'd come back after dinner. There'd be some grumbling about that, but nobody really [laughs] gave a damn, and stuff. So then when I was seventeen, I graduated. Yeah, this was funny, too. I really grew up fast. I pushed myself through school. I only spent a week in kindergarten. They put me in the first grade because I knew everything. I talked real early. It doesn't mean I was smart or even that I had a high IQ. I just, for survival, I picked up very fast on what was going on around me.

[00:39:06.50]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: You snowed them.

[00:39:07.01]

JOAN BROWN: Huh? Yeah, I snowed them. So I was put in the first grade at something like four years, four and a half. We started kindergarten at like four and a half. I spent a week in kindergarten. I went into first grade. So I graduated—I'd just turned seventeen when I got out of high school. And I didn't want to—I hated all the choices that was there at the time and that the other kids, children, young people made—to either get married—By that point, at seventeen, I hated the guys that I knew. I thought they were real stupid, all these Catholic guys. So I hated them. I didn't want to get married.

I didn't want to—I had worked every summer for the last five years. Lied. I said I was eighteen, graduating from high school. And from fourteen on, I worked in the summers to earn extra money, which every summer I spent on clothes. Not that I really needed because my parents had it. I liked the independence. I liked working. I liked getting out and stuff. So I didn't like office work. I was lousy at it. I hated college. I didn't like school. I hated academic subjects. I faked my way through. I did well, but I didn't learn a damn thing. [Laughs.] Again, I was a little con artist.

[00:40:27.70]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Smiled at the nuns.

[00:40:29.17]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah. So art school was—I saw the ad in the paper. Art school. Ah-ha, here I can get out and find a new life for myself. And so a week before I was to go to a regular college—that girls' Catholic college.

[00:40:41.67]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Lone Mountain?

[00:40:42.31]

JOAN BROWN: Yes.

[00:40:43.27]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: So you were all enrolled in Lone Mountain, which is a logical extension of your Catholic secondary school.

[00:40:49.99]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah. That's right. And my folks would certainly willing financially to send me to college and stuff. I saw the ad and I went to the art school. And I loved the environment when I walked in. And it was a whole new world for me. And I was just ready for it. It was just right. And that was it, the transition from the Catholic schools into the art school.

[Recorder stops; restarts.]

[00:41:16.27]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, before we go on to your experience in art school, which of course, would be very important, very interesting, the sort of recitation of your own family background raised certain questions that I think that I would like to ask.

[00:41:37.12]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah, and I have some others—

[00:41:38.71]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Some other things to add.

[00:41:40.90]

JOAN BROWN: Positive ones. [Laughs.]

[00:41:42.16]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Good. But several things occurred to me. You mentioned several times that during these years, or as far back as you can remember, you wanted nothing more than to get out of that situation, I think quite understandably.

[00:41:58.52]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah. I always saw a choice.

[00:42:00.16]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, this is what I wanted to ask. What did you see as the exit route? I mean, what did you see yourself doing? You were going to get out, but to what?

[00:42:10.87]

JOAN BROWN: To a more sophisticated—what I felt would be a sophisticated place in the world where there were people who were interested in things at that time that I thought were a big deal, maybe like material things, for that matter. People who were interested in good food. I remember going into, accidentally, with a friend, a Chinese guy—jeez, my parents would have flipped if they'd known I'd gone with a Chinese guy—to a Chinese restaurant and experiencing Chinese food and coming back and telling my folks I went to a restaurant.

[00:42:45.35]

I didn't say it was a Chinese guy, said I went with some people—to a Chinese restaurant. They thought that was hysterically funny. "Oh, my God. Did you get any fingers in your chop suey?" This kind of mentality of stuff. And I found the food fascinating and delicious. And wine—people who may be interested in wine, or people who had traveled. My folks had never traveled. My father had during the First World War, naturally, and said he hated it and never wanted to travel again. My mother had never been anywhere. I don't think she'd been to Sacramento. She'd been to L.A., and I think outside of the Bay Area. That was about it. Yeah. Avalon. They went to Avalon.

[00:43:28.09]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Went to Catalina?

[00:43:28.93]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah, on their honeymoon or something. [Laughs.] Probably when that song was popular, which is, I don't mean that in any put down way at all.

[00:43:40.60]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Certainly they could have afforded it, though.

[00:43:41.14]

JOAN BROWN: So there were people who had seen other—that there were other places in the world, and people, groups of people who had seen this, and could talk about it and things like this. And my immediate goal as a young person was to seek a more sophisticated or worldly group of people who in turn would teach me, and allow me these experiences outside of the damn Catholic San Francisco environment, as well as my own home. But it

was at that school environment, too, where these people had more things materially than mine. I didn't have that attitude. I wanted more. I didn't like it.

[00:44:20.66]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, how did you propose to do this? With many girls, it would be through a marriage. Or was it through getting an interesting job like being an airline stewardess?

[00:44:31.31]

JOAN BROWN: It was by going to art school. It was choosing to go to the art school, which was totally just a circumstance, a happenstance.

[00:44:44.76]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: But that was, of course, when you—after you had graduated from high school. What I'm trying to get at is, at an earlier time, perhaps earlier in high school or maybe even in junior high, what were your fantasies? How did you see yourself removing yourself from the situation?

[00:45:01.11]

JOAN BROWN: Going into the business world, in the sense of—as I say, I had this tremendous connection to clothes, which I still do. You wouldn't know it here. I'm sitting in my paint outfit. But I still once in a while go down and spend a great deal of money on various fancy clothes at Saks or I. Magnin's. And I like clothes. I like the fantasy world of clothes.

[00:45:23.62]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Did you want to be a buyer, or—

[00:45:25.38]

JOAN BROWN: Yes, something like that or a dress designer. And now that I look back, I'm not bragging or anything, I think I could have made a hell of a lot of money at it.

[00:45:33.90]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: No doubt.

[00:45:33.99]

JOAN BROWN: I have an intuition as to what will be popular, and things like that. As a kid, I was a pace setter, if you can—in Catholic schools in San Francisco, if you can possibly think of that as—the first one to have very short hair, kind of cut like Napoleon's, and wore nubby—finally got rid of the cashmere sweaters, and got into very nubby kind of home-knit Irish sweaters and things, which became popular. I had a real sense of feeling for clothes. So I saw myself perhaps going off to New York City and becoming a buyer, and things like that.

[00:46:12.70]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: That's interesting because, although you say, and according to—as I read Brenda Richardson's catalog for your show at Berkeley, that it wasn't as if all during your young life you were looking to a career as an artist. I think this is something—

[00:46:35.61]

JOAN BROWN: Oh, no. Absolutely not.

[00:46:37.33]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: But nevertheless, it seems that even if it's just in terms of being an interest in dress design and so forth and cutting out paper dolls, it was art directed in a way. Whether or not you saw this—

[00:46:48.99]

JOAN BROWN: Right. Whether it was literal or not, yeah. Graphic. Other fantasies that I had, which I just remembered, which is something I would still like to do someday, maybe. Maybe when I'm retired from teaching, because I intend to stay to get the tenure at Cal, unless anything drastic happens—economic, terrible overthrow of the country economically or something.

[00:47:13.40]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well then we all go—

[00:47:14.51]

JOAN BROWN: Then we all go to hell. But barring some kind of far out catastrophe, I intend to keep on teaching. Maybe some time if I was off for a year or two or when I retire, it's something I would—I've always wanted to do since I was a kid. I'd forgotten about this. And I've been very interested in it. I would love to study Egyptology. I was going to say archaeology, but Egyptology, God, as a kid, I read book after book after book for many years on this. And it's something that just fascinates me. One time I got the opportunity to dig up some Indian pottery somewhere. And other than painting, it's something I can spend hours without ever getting bored or anything else crossing my mind. I can sit there for eight hours.

[00:48:00.42]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: You must be looking forward to the show that's coming to the de Young, the big Egyptian show.

[00:48:03.34]

JOAN BROWN: I am, yeah. But I'm not looking forward to that crowd. Maybe I won't even see it because of that.

[00:48:07.53]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, come over early one day and I'll take you through.

[00:48:12.10]

JOAN BROWN: All right. I'll call you first.

[00:48:13.77]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Okay.

[00:48:14.73]

JOAN BROWN: Thank you.

[00:48:17.04]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Another question.

[00:48:19.71]

JOAN BROWN: So I had that, maybe becoming an Egyptologist.

[00:48:24.08]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Yeah, that's interesting. That's good to have down. Well, I may as well mention it now, sometime we might work this out. They will edit this out of the tape. But at any rate, we have a very good friend, a young fellow who is studying Egyptology at Berkeley and Coptic languages and things like that. He's really, really great. And who knows, maybe it would be fun to get together.

[00:48:53.98]

JOAN BROWN: It would. I would like that. Well, see, now to jump at that, it has directly influenced my painting. I've always, whenever I could—well, for many years as a child, I

used to be stuck going to these hideous concerts out in Golden Gate Park, my father, my grandmother, my mother. And my grandmother and mother would go sit on the bench on Sundays and listen to this music, which now sounds kind of nice when I walk through. But as a kid, I just hated because all these other old people talk about illnesses and stuff.

[00:49:24.36]

And my father—this was when I was very little, before I was independent enough to say "No, I've got something going with my friends." And my dad would go, would say he was going to go watch the ball game. And he'd cut across the park over to Ninth Avenue and go to The Little Shamrock and drink [laughs], where he had a bunch of Irish drinking buddies over there on Sunday afternoon. And so I would go to the de Young Museum. And that mummy, that one dumb, stupid, ratty, rotten mummy—

[00:49:54.30]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: It's still there.

[00:49:54.54]

JOAN BROWN: —that you still have. It used to be just—now, you got kind of fancy. But at the time, it was just out in the middle there, right in front of the information desk. And you'd come in and that would be in this old marble casket kind of thing. It was open. You could look in. And jeez I, spent a lot of time.

[00:50:14.25]

But any time I have traveled, like the collections most of the time, other than if there's a very, very good contemporary show on, is the Egyptian collections. And it's influenced my painting on and off over the years. And it's influenced it very much recently, extremely. We were in Chicago. My painting was just going for a turn in Chicago in April, and I couldn't wait to get back to Chicago to see the Egyptian collection at the—damn it. I must have had too much wine. I can't remember the museum back there.

[00:50:49.99]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: The Art Institute?

[00:50:50.93]

JOAN BROWN: No. No, no. It's not the place that has the planes and stuff. What's the name of that other museum?

[00:50:59.23]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: I don't know.

[00:50:59.66]

JOAN BROWN: I'll remember it shortly. [The Field Museum of Natural History –Ed.] But they have an Egyptian collection in the basement. And I've been wanting to paint people in a more simple, direct way than I have before. And it's been something I've been after for about two or three years that I've been wanting to do, and I haven't been able to do it right. That's why I've had all the silhouettes and stuff like that. And all of a sudden, it clicked seeing that stuff to paint these things. And now they're starting—

[00:51:24.43]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: They're very hieratic.

[00:51:26.47]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah, to paint them just like I paint my face because I was looking at those damn things. And I thought, those damn Egyptians, male and female, they got up every morning and they put on the eyebrows and they put on eyeliner and their lips. And they distinguish very simply these features. No regard for dark and light, the way light falls and blah, blah, blah. They're a very graphic, simple way of doing it, almost cartoon style.

[00:51:52.46]

And so this was a terrific breakthrough for me. As I say, something I've been after that directly came from this Egyptian collection, which I'd seen for the second time, which was about five years back. And now I'm finally able to put this into form. And I'm very excited about it. You'll see it at the show at the Campbell Gallery, which will come next month.

[00:52:13.22]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Good.

[00:52:14.35]

JOAN BROWN: Although these don't look like Egyptians, to me it's the same kind of way of describing faces, describing—

[00:52:21.65]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: So Joan Brown as a child wanted to be a Egyptologist.

[00:52:25.67]

JOAN BROWN: Right.

[00:52:25.81]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: That's great. A second question. Obviously, I don't even think I have to be euphemistic about this. Your family life wasn't that happy, your early family life. And there were a lot of tensions there. How did this affect your view in a personal way of domestic life in general and marriage?

[00:52:57.67]

JOAN BROWN: That's it. You know, I never thought of that. Isn't that funny? That's something I should certainly—

[00:53:01.70]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Absolutely, that's the first question.

[00:53:03.83]

JOAN BROWN: Yes. And it's something I've never thought of.

[00:53:07.53]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Did you think, my God, this is the worst of all possible worlds and family life?

[00:53:12.96]

JOAN BROWN: Oh no. No. Otherwise, see—I've been married three times. I get married. I prefer family life. If, jeez, some crazy catastrophe again happened and I was alone again, either through being a widow or divorced or what have you, I'm sure I would marry again. I like the structure of a family life. Now, come to think of it, looking back as a kid, I can remember saying to people I wanted to have eleven kids. I wanted a real big—

[00:53:47.51]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: But not the eighteen of the Castros.

[00:53:49.20]

JOAN BROWN: No. No, no. I find one is plenty.

[00:53:51.93]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, so you didn't then extend that—you didn't feel that your

marriage had to be a reproduction.

[00:53:59.22]

JOAN BROWN: And I talked to—I'm very surprised now. I talk to people—I was just talking to a girl the other day in her late 20s who just started living with a guy. And for her, this was a big commitment. And she said, "Oh, God, I was just shaking when we moved his things in." And I said, "Why?" She says, "It's such a commitment."

[00:54:17.02]

She says, "Oh, I could never be married. That would be a much larger commitment. That would just be awful," and stuff. And no, I've never felt anything like that. I like the structure of a family life. I like the growth and the exchange that can take place with a close relationship. I'm very much a focused or a channeled kind of person.

[00:54:42.90]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Maybe that's one reason that we get along, because that's the way—

[00:54:45.87]

JOAN BROWN: You're the same way? Yeah, yeah. Oh, God, I would hate to—

[00:54:48.93]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: I can't imagine—

[00:54:50.37]

JOAN BROWN: To live a constant life of one-night stands or never knowing anybody. Just everything on the surface and stuff. Yeah, I remember a very good friend of mine, I was horrified by, not because he was gay, I don't give a damn about that at all. We're very close. But what he said, one reason he preferred the life he did, whether it could be heterosexual or homosexual—he just happened to be homosexual—was because he couldn't stand to wake up with anyone in the morning and either see them, or have them see him. And he loved this, a different person every night. He didn't want to be alone. So he had somebody different every night. And to me, that was the most horrifying kind of thing. I could never imagine myself—

[00:55:36.45]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Maybe that's a sort of fear about personal adequacy, of revealing too much to yourself. Because over a period of time, your partner sees you in all sorts of ways.

[00:55:49.56]

JOAN BROWN: As they well should. As you are.

[00:55:52.00]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: As they should. Yeah, that's right.

[00:55:52.78]

JOAN BROWN: But only then, after a period of time, I feel with anything, any involvement with anything, including art, as an art historian, what do you do—in a relationship, after the fantasy goes, only then can you really build upon something. And that's what's valuable. There's situations where you can't. This can't happen. Fine. Then all the fantasies out, you say, okay, fine. Either this lifestyle isn't for me, or this person, and you agree, and you go off, and you try and build it up again.

[00:56:26.02]

But no, I believe very strongly in a relationship, in our society, marriage. I like the ritual of marriage. As I say, I would get married again. I'm not just talking about living with someone. There's a certain funny ritual, which as human beings, we're connected to rituals where

something happens. And it's a ritual. It's symbolic. And there's something very big, very large about it. It's not infallible. Obviously. [Laughs.]

[00:56:56.86]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: No, no. But certainly your work reflects a very close, very intimate involvement, and understandably also an appreciation of domestic life. This is part of the subject matter.

[00:57:18.50]

JOAN BROWN: Yes. No, it didn't turn me off. But I think one thing that it did do was point out that we do have choices. And I think my life with both my mother and father was a very gift-giving kind of situation, as painful and as negative as it may sound on the tape. And I don't mean this in any patronizing way. It's something I've thought a great deal about and has developed over the years. Nothing naturally—I just felt anger and hatred as a kid all the way around.

[00:57:51.84]

But my father taught me a great deal about gentleness, which is something that did not develop that much in my own personality. I thought you had to always come out fighting. And I did during those early years. I survived that way. Fight my mother, held her down for a number of years from imposing too much upon me, for my own survival.

[00:58:21.76]

But my dad always represented a gentleness, which I'm very touched by and very appreciative of. And it's something fairly unique. Someone else may say he was utterly and totally a weak kind of character, a doormat. When I went into therapy a number of years back, which I decided to do after I'd been married twice, and thought, "what the hell is going on," he was referred to by the therapist as a doormat. That didn't sit well with me. I thought there was a great deal more there. And there was a gentleness and a natural, innate kind of gentleness that has been very, very impressive to me. And I see it now. I see it in other people. I see it in my son. I see it in kids. But I especially see it in my son. Maybe it's inherited. I don't know what. But it's something I'm very touched by. I have to stop and—sometimes, I'll just stop myself, put on the gears, and try and connect to that again rather than then rushing through.

[00:59:23.12]

And for me, this was a great gift. The other gift from my mother's side, I feel, is that I knew I didn't want to either live like that or end up like that, with wanting something and yet thinking I couldn't do a damn thing about it. And her failure gave me, in a sense, the go-ahead, that, hell, you can do anything you want to do if you work at it, but you don't sit around waiting for it to happen. And her utter failure at coping with her goals, fantasies, desires, and real, more important, her actual situation, I think was a great gift to me in terms of being able to take action on that.

[01:00:13.77]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: What about the—

[01:00:14.94]

JOAN BROWN: Does that make any sense, or does that sound too corny?

[01:00:17.65]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: No, no, it doesn't sound corny at all. I think that it's quite obvious that you've evaluated, you've looked back and thought about this quite a bit. Another question, and my last one in terms of this early background, you mentioned that the family would go on Sunday or whatever to Golden Gate Park to, apparently, your mother's interest, to hear the band, or the concerts and so forth. And it raises a question, what about cultural interests in the family?

[01:00:55.41]

JOAN BROWN: [Laughs.] Absolutely zero. The only artist I'd ever heard of was Rembrandt when I went to art school. I'd never heard of Picasso. I'd never heard of any Impressionist.

[01:01:03.57]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Rembrandt's not bad, of course.

[01:01:05.28]

JOAN BROWN: Oh, he's my favorite. No, I'm just saying that from outside connections, either in school or from my—oh no. God, they loved—Lawrence Welk was the big deal in terms of music. And I remember having a fight with a kid in high school, a girl, about who was better, Jose Iturbi or Lawrence Welk. Can you imagine that?

[01:01:28.82]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: And you, of course, aligned yourself—

[01:01:30.52]

JOAN BROWN: With Lawrence Welk. Yeah.

[01:01:32.17]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: So in a way, being very—

[01:01:34.57]

JOAN BROWN: And I still like a lot of that corny music, too. [Laughs.]

[01:01:37.63]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Being somewhat hot and cold about it, would you evaluate your childhood situation as culturally deprived, in terms of, say, availability in a more classical sense, in terms of perhaps, books—a library with literature?

[01:02:04.42]

JOAN BROWN: No, no, I wouldn't. Because again, I feel and felt even then that I had had the option. And I used to read—well, I used to set a goal—it's nutty. I'm getting better at it. But if I decide to do something, I'll just throw myself a hundred percent, many times overboard, and many times to my own detriment. And I used to—

[END OF TRACK AAA_brown75_7963_m]

[Some material lost after tape ended –Ed.]

[00:00:05.48]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Joan Brown, side two.

[00:00:07.91]

JOAN BROWN: Okay. As I was saying, I had gone to the library, which was right up on Octavia and Union, which I loved going to. Looked like a big ship with portholes. Beautiful old building. Spent a lot of time there. And I used to set up a goal. And I did this for both myself and my girlfriend. I began giving orders, telling people what to do. And we read maybe fifteen books a week or more. And it was all about ancient history, mostly having to do with Egypt, but some Greek stuff, and Roman stuff, and things like that.

[00:00:43.35]

And then, too, I would wander around the library. A lot of times I'd go up at night, walk up from where my parents lived, which was only about seven or eight blocks away, and would browse around and pick what I wanted. And I felt although there were no books—my folks took *Reader's Digest*. They didn't take *LIFE* and *TIME*. Oh, they took—yeah, they took a funny newspaper, the *Call Bulletin*, which was really considered a stupid newspaper in San Francisco. It was a rightist kind of just dumbass newspaper. And also a—it's not *Newsweek*.

It's not *TIME*. There's another magazine.

[00:01:21.29]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: *U.S. News and World Report*?

[00:01:22.45]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah. Right. That's it. Yeah. They did subscribe to that, too, although I don't think that was ever read.

[00:01:28.89]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: That would fit, though. That's a rather—

[00:01:31.11]

JOAN BROWN: Conservative?

[00:01:31.86]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Yeah.

[00:01:32.24]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah. Magazine. And that was around. And I wasn't interested in any of that. But I realized having that library that I had a choice to read whatever I wanted to. And I didn't feel—I was interested in meeting people, as I said earlier, which I did later on in art school, that did know of other things and could open up these doors for me. But no, I didn't—I don't think I was [culturally deprived –Ed.].

[00:01:57.34]

And in many ways, it depends on what you mean by culture, too. I feel that I got a great deal out of many situations I was in in many of my paintings, which someone else would say are cultural, you know, or works of art, where the subject matter came from much of the environment that I was subjected to. And I can think of a few very graphic kind of instances.

[00:02:23.68]

One is, there is a painting in the living room right now of a guy drinking with his dog at the bar. It's one of my very favorite paintings. I would never sell that. And I have been—people have offered to buy it. But I really love that painting. And as a kid, my father met with many of the men in the neighborhood, and they walked dogs, although I was never allowed to have a dog. I used to walk a neighbor's dog. And he would borrow that dog.

[00:02:50.22]

After I got older, he used to walk the dog when I was no longer interested. And he loved it. He always wanted a dog, but they couldn't have one where they were, and due to their own damn circumstances. But he would walk that dog. And all these men would meet down on the Marina on Chestnut Street down there, not too far from where you are. And they would bring the dogs into the bar, and they would sit them up on the bar stool or get them a plate of beer on the floor until they were all kicked out, then they used to be tied outside to parking meters or the telephone poles.

[00:03:24.66]

But I remember that as a kid, going in to look for my dad maybe on a Sunday afternoon, or in the evening sometimes as I got older. And there would be these dogs sitting there. And the dogs looked so wise, like they were really, you know, knew where everything was at. And the people, of course, looked absurd. You know, this was very moving, very touching to me. So I would say, yes, that was a situation that someone else would not have gotten who might have been showed a very expensive book or a Skira book on Impressionism or what have you.

[00:04:02.97]

And that was one—the other thing, the one relationship I had with my mother, which was very enjoyable and which I have painted over and over again up until what I'm doing right now, probably always will, and still enjoy, is a dining—a drink, a dining situation, fancy dining rooms. That's the one thing she did like to spend money on. She would never go with my father, but her and I used to go to dress up and go downtown to all these marvelous old kinds of '30s restaurants. And she would spend a fortune on the meal. She didn't care about that particular thing.

[00:04:38.73]

And one was the El Prado Bar, which now is defunct. It was torn down maybe five years ago, which was just from the '30s, all this beautiful paneling and art deco all over the place, art deco mirrors and all this crazy kind of stuff. And I would watch the people ever since I was just a little kid up until the time maybe I was sixteen, before she—or seventeen—or, no. No, no, no—up until maybe a few years before she died, come to think of it, I would still go there. And I'd watch all these people. And I loved seeing all that.

[00:05:12.91]

And this continues to come out, because San Francisco in many ways stood still in certain areas. And there was very much this '30s kind of flavor. And I would watch these exchanges. And so I would say, in other ways, I got educated. And I do not feel culturally deprived because I didn't know any more.

[00:05:32.69]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: No. I certainly didn't mean that as an insult.

[00:05:34.87]

JOAN BROWN: No. I know you don't. I just wanted to say what my feelings—of course you didn't. I mean that in no negative way whatsoever. I just wanted to cast a light on what my feelings of cultural situations are. And I don't feel they're exposing your kid to Goya, and Rembrandt, and all this kind of stuff. Noel happens to know who these are—Noel being my son—because I have reproductions up in my room. And he'll say, "Who are these guys?" And now they're putting out these t-shirts with Goya paintings and Seurat paintings on them. And Noel saw that the other day in the emporium when we were shopping for some clothes for him for camp.

[00:06:13.96]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: I've got to get one.

[00:06:14.93]

JOAN BROWN: They're only for little kids. He said, "Oh, there's a Goya," you know, and stuff, but this is totally accidentally. [Laughs.] I've never, accidentally—I've never educated him in that sense. And I feel everybody to their own devices. As you grow older, if you want to seek something out, if you're going to seek something out, you'll do it. And you don't need somebody shoving the great literature, *War and Peace* down your throat, or contemporary writers, or movies, or all that. I don't feel that, to me, that was any detriment whatsoever. That's only my feelings about it.

[00:06:50.96]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, I think that there are many who will agree with you. There are those who say that if this business of assigning, say, great books, and to read them very dutifully is a mistake, for one thing, then you resist it, and that, in fact, if you're left to your own devices and you're an intelligent person, you're interested in reading, that you'll pretty well read your way through the important things anyway, or most of them.

[00:07:18.22]

JOAN BROWN: Right.

[00:07:20.17]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: One more question before—and I am very interested in hearing about your experience at the Art Institute, or I guess it was still the California School of Fine Arts when you enrolled. What about early art training, specific art training, say, in high school? Was art offered as part of the curriculum?

[00:07:46.06]

JOAN BROWN: Art was offered, and I took it for—I guess I lasted a semester, although I only showed up to class maybe three weeks. And I hated it. What it was, it was a file cabinet, kind of a double file cabinet, with calendars in it. And it was taught by a nun. And the nun had some pictures down in the chapel, the little church part of the school called the chapel, of the Madonna and Child, and things like that.

[00:08:20.26]

And so up in the art room, there was this file cabinet. And it had pictures off of calendar covers where the days were cut off. And they might be—I don't remember if they were Norman Rockwell things or not, but, you know, stuff along that order. And so when you wanted to paint something, you'd pull out one of these calendars and you'd paint it.

[00:08:42.49]

And the first lesson, though, was—which again, was utterly incongruous, and I keep—I think my whole childhood was incongruous, which maybe that's an advantage, too, which never related to anything else—was one exercise, the first day of class, to cut up these different pieces of colored paper, like green and orange stuff, cut them up into triangles, and then drop them down on a white piece of paper, whatever pattern they fell into, which, of course, was an abstract pattern with these triangles, then to paint a painting on a canvas board of this. And that was lesson number one. And after that, it was the calendar. And I thought that was really stupid. Yeah.

[00:09:25.72]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Lesson number one sounds incredibly avant-garde, though.

[00:09:29.75]

JOAN BROWN: Mindless avant-garde. [They laugh.]

[00:09:31.96]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Maybe so.

[00:09:34.24]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah.

[00:09:34.63]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: So that really was the extent of your—

[00:09:36.95]

JOAN BROWN: Oh, oh, yes.

[00:09:38.34]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: —pre-Art Institute art theory?

[00:09:41.23]

JOAN BROWN: That was it. On my own, as I said, I made paper dolls, which I loved doing, and designed all kinds of clothes for these paper dolls—paper dolls of all different ages. And one thing that got me making paper dolls is that they were all the same age and type. And I would have paper dolls, both male and female paper dolls. I would draw all different ages. I mean, I used to have one I really liked called Aunt Agatha, a woman in her 50s. [Laughs.] And I'd have little kids, and these people, both male and female, and create all these stories

and all these clothes for these particular people. But oh, I would also—certain movie stars I liked, I would buy movie magazines. I would do pencil drawings of Arlene Dahl, and people like that who were popular at the time.

[00:10:31.55]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Arlene Dahl? Yeah.

[00:10:32.72]

JOAN BROWN: In a strapless gown.

[00:10:34.82]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Right. I'm sure very elegant, sophisticated looking, the things that you wanted to make.

[00:10:41.42]

JOAN BROWN: Craved.

[00:10:42.98]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Yeah. Well, what about the California School of Fine Arts, the venerable institution? You enrolled in '55, to recapitulate, after you were due to go to attend Lone Mountain College. And I gather really at the eleventh hour or even later, you saw an ad for the Art Institute. Apparently, you didn't even know about it—

[00:11:09.86]

JOAN BROWN: Mm-mm [negative]. I didn't.

[00:11:10.46]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: —although it was only—not that many blocks from where you lived.

[00:11:12.55]

JOAN BROWN: About six blocks. [Laughs.]

[00:11:13.50]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Yeah. And quite obviously, you saw this as—I don't know, I don't want to put words in your mouth, but with a certain amount of panic, perhaps, saw this as an attractive alternative to the continuation of a Catholic school education. And so you enrolled?

[00:11:33.37]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah. Okay. Now, I'll get right to that. I just want to mention one more thing, which later on I'll tie in from the past. But I thought I'd lay the footwork now. And that is that, from my childhood, I got a very strong sense of the absurdity, and all the dimensions that happen within the absurdity, you know, pathos, humor, gentleness, violence, all this stuff that can go into absurdity. W.C. Fields is a great example of this, and one of my very favorite artists of all times.

[00:12:14.94]

And this thread of what I call absurdity—and I can give some mention to some actual situations going back to my past—have been a real main thread throughout the work I've done almost from the beginning, maybe after the first year that I started working. And this, again, I feel was a great connection, and a gift allowed to me in my own past. And it's something I really express, and I feel is maybe the main communication I have between what I do and relates to other—and that other people can relate to. Okay?

[Recorder stops; restarts.]

[00:13:06.58]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: What about the California School of Fine Arts? You enrolled really on the wing. I mean, you just went down there and kissed off the Lone Mountain College and—

[00:13:19.42]

JOAN BROWN: All my past.

[00:13:20.20]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: —you were in art school.

[00:13:21.01]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah. Yeah. Well, I loved the atmosphere, fantasy-wise that I walked into. Here was this beautiful school in a great location, familiar location, for one thing, too. And the first sense of the place, atmosphere I got walking in the door, and here's this brick patio. There's a tile fountain. And there's all these guys playing bongo drums around the fountain. Now, these guys, as it turns out, were mostly G.I., Vietnam—not Vietnam, excuse me—Korean. My God, you have to go back a ways—Paul, in that paisley container, there's matches—back to the Korean War.

[00:14:17.01]

And most of the students there at the time were Korean War vets. And they had a real good deal at that time. Later on, they changed where they not only got the tuition paid, the schooling paid, and, of course, the G.I. Bill, but they also got supplies. A lot of people took advantage of this, unfortunately, and got things, and then sold them, and made extra money, so then that got cut out. I'm sidetracking, excuse me, on that issue. But the main enrollment at the school in terms of students were Korean War vets. And the school was very, very small that first year. Jeez. I can't remember.

[00:15:01.89]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: And it's '55, right?

[00:15:03.20]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah. This is 1955. I hate to quote the exact figure. It had been in a bad financial situation. And it was either the first or second year that Gurdon Woods, who did so much for that school, that he was there. And the school, prior to his coming with the other director there—I'm not going to mention any names.

[00:15:28.17]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, he replaced MacAgy, didn't he?

[00:15:30.80]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah. Or no, was it Mundt? I think it was Ernest Mundt.

[00:15:34.85]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Right. There was somebody—

[00:15:35.48]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah. Mundt had replaced MacAgy. And he replaced Mundt. And they didn't know whether to close the school or what. So there was kind of a fleeting atmosphere that you did feel at the school. But to me, these guys were really sophisticated, really exciting, wearing sandals, playing bongo drums. And I remember myself walking in there in the patio. And here were these guys in sandals with turtlenecks, and long hair, and beards, playing bongo drums. And I thought, "Oh my God, this is where I belong. I really want to go here."

[00:16:11.25]

So I walked to the office. At that time, the office consisted of one secretary who was in front of Gurdon Woods [laughs], the Director, who was Marcelle, who I later got to like—kind of a

nasty, very straight lady in her—middle-aged lady, tiny little lady. And I said, you know, "What's the deal with this? What's the tuition? What's the procedure," all this and that. And I had to submit a portfolio, I think. Maybe I'm wrong, because I remember somewhere along the line I had to—I turned in my drawings of movie stars or something.

[00:16:45.74]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Arlene Dahl.

[00:16:46.13]

JOAN BROWN: Arlene Dahl, et cetera. I forget who. Maybe Betty Grable was in there. I forget who else, but along that line—pencil drawings on typing paper and with the heads floating and strapless gowns floating under the breast. But somewhere along the line, I did submit something. And I went home and I told my folks. I said, "Gee, I just found this swell school I want to go to." And they said—I think I'm getting that story a little bit mixed up, because something else happened prior to that.

[00:17:24.45]

After I went into the school—that's right, and saw these guys in sandals and stuff, I went out. I walked out. I went downtown. I bought myself some sandals and some more arty attire, I think, some wishbone earrings and things like that. And then that was it. Then I waited a bit. I didn't tell my folks anything. And it's this wine that's clouding my mind.

[00:17:49.01]

So then as I was—just prior, before I was going to Lone Mountain, I did tell my folks I was going here instead. It might have been the same day I was supposed to go to Lone Mountain. There's something kind of funny in there, which I can't quite connect to. Anyway, I did go to the art school. I did come back. And at some point, just right in September there, I told my folks I wanted to go there instead.

[00:18:15.58]

They agreed, very reluctantly. But again, there had been no point of view—which was in this case to my advantage—in this family, about what was going on. So I was able to get out the money, to get a check, to go back and pay the tuition somehow, whatever took place there. I don't think there was any big scene. There was some reluctance.

[00:18:41.14]

Go back, pay the money, and go there the next day or two as an enrolled student at the California School of Fine Arts, fall of '55, September or whatever the date may be, rather than Lone Mountain. And I believe they got their deposit back if there was one made at Lone Mountain, or something. It wasn't complicated, whatever the situation was. It was a surprise, but it was flexible.

[00:19:08.02]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, it was an atmosphere, I gather, as much as anything else that really—

[00:19:11.81]

JOAN BROWN: That's what attracted me.

[00:19:12.96]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: —enchanted you?

[00:19:13.61]

JOAN BROWN: That's right. yes. Yes. The atmosphere pulled me in.

[00:19:17.45]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Bohemian. Free.

[00:19:18.87]

JOAN BROWN: Absolutely.

[00:19:19.64]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: All these things that you had wanted during all these years.

[00:19:24.77]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah. Or no, not even consciously, but all of a sudden they're there in form. And you say, a-ha, this is what I—you know what you don't want. That's the way it is. I didn't want that sterile atmosphere at Lone Mountain, which I just hated.

[00:19:38.69]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, who did you—do you remember your first term there, your instructors?

[00:19:44.11]

JOAN BROWN: Sure. Very well.

[00:19:45.18]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: What you had to take? What courses?

[00:19:47.44]

JOAN BROWN: And I had a hell of a time. I liked the students very much. A certain number of people, in particular a guy named Pete Forakis, who was a seasoned Korean War vet with the beard, the sandals, the whole works—he was the real Bohemian. Everyone looked up to him or hated him because he was—and he was a guy who smoked marijuana, which at that time in '55 was just, oh, guys were talking about "blowing the whistle and," you know, stuff like that, on him. He was the really, really "bad" guy.

[00:20:18.10]

And so anyway, he was quite the guy and the leader in the Fine Arts area. At that time, they had the Commercial Art School going full tilt then, too. And I was friendly with both elements, although I knew that my forte was not in commercial art. It wasn't in fine art, either, at that time. But in commercial art, you had to be neater.

[00:20:47.29]

And that first year, I had a terrible time. We couldn't take painting, according—[Dog barks.] That's the dog acting up because the firecrackers. We couldn't take painting. We had to take design. And one of my teachers was Dorr Bothwell. And the other was Ralph Putzker in some other class. And Varda was teaching something. Jean Varda.

[00:21:10.44]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Really?

[00:21:11.01]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah. In fact, I had Varda for two or three years there.

[00:21:14.98]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: What did he teach?

[00:21:16.99]

JOAN BROWN: Oh, what was it? Color and Composition or something like that. The title was a formal, normally a very structured class, although his wasn't that structured. And I liked

him. And he loved young women. My God, I was seventeen years old and just, oh, him and I were just the greatest of buddies, but in a very nice way. He liked, you know, young women. Never mind. [Laughs.] I was going to talk about what we talked about earlier. But anyway.

[00:21:49.87]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: I hear you.

[00:21:50.74]

JOAN BROWN: Yes. Right. So the other guy teaching life drawing—we could take a life drawing class in that first year. And that was Roger Barr. Now during that year, I did get close to a lot of people in both the fine arts and the commercial art. Again, the student body was very, very small. And I would venture to say there were less than 200 people altogether. Don't—this is no absolute. Someone else would have to be statistical about this. But over my years there, naturally the school grew. And it was terribly small. There were very, very few young people like right out of high school, just a handful of young people.

[00:22:31.60]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Mostly veterans.

[00:22:34.81]

JOAN BROWN: Very few women. Yeah, mostly vets. Very few girls. And I remember being shocked at going into my first life drawing class with another girl who was my same age. Her name was Joan, too. And I can't remember her last name for the life of me. But her name was Joan. She was down from Washington. We were both out of high school. How she got there, I have no idea whatsoever. Walking in—

[00:22:56.50]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Maybe she was following Allan and Wiley?

[00:22:58.49]

JOAN BROWN: Oh, no, They hadn't come here yet.

[00:22:59.62]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: They hadn't come yet?

[00:23:00.95]

JOAN BROWN: No. This is '55, pre those guys.

[00:23:04.28]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: That's right.

[00:23:04.78]

JOAN BROWN: And we walk in. And there was a naked woman, Florence Allen. Florence Allen, the standard model. So we were so embarrassed. I didn't know what to do. You know, there were only a few women in the class. I was just mortified and stuff. So anyway, we talked about it at the coffee break or something, this girl and I. And she said, "Oh, I'm just shocked. My God, I just don't know what to do."

I said, "Well, I don't know what to do either, but let's just stick it out." So then as the weeks went by, finally I brought home drawings. And my folks saw these were drawings of nude women. And they said, "Those are statues, aren't they?" And I said, "No, they aren't." And my mother was going to call the police on the school [laughs] because she said, this is an immoral—you know, she thought it was some kind of orgy situation.

[00:23:52.78]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: What if they had been nude males?

[00:23:55.45]

JOAN BROWN: Well, there were those, too, except I don't know, for some reason in that portfolio—I think she would have reacted stronger. I don't know. But by this time, I was getting seasoned as to the nudes and I didn't care anymore. And then after that first year, I was going to quit. I did just awful. In the design class, I had a terrible time in certain projects, very technical projects. I had no ability this way whatsoever. I would spill my water on my Dorr Bothwell assignment and stuff and get yelled at. And I thought, oh my God, I have no talent. I'm in the wrong area here. I'm going to get the hell out of this school.

[00:24:42.56]

Now, during that year—I did bad during the fall semester. Although I liked the students and I loved the atmosphere, my grades were poor, very poor. And in the spring semester, I met a guy named Bill Brown. And gee, he to me was the ultimate in sophistication. He'd lived in New York. He'd been to Japan in the Army. You know, the Korean War.

[00:25:08.18]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: How old was he?

[00:25:09.41]

JOAN BROWN: He was twenty-five and I was seventeen. He was eight years older than I was. And I'd never met anybody that sophisticated, ever. And yet, more or less, he came from the same environment. He wasn't so far out that I couldn't relate to him. He'd been to the Catholic schools, St. Ignatius. He'd been to USF. He lived out in the Avenues.

[00:25:28.46]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: So he was from San Francisco?

[00:25:30.09]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah. Right. He was born here. And so he was more or less from the same kind of environment I was. So in that sense, I could relate. But yet he was really sophisticated and travelled.

[00:25:42.05]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: And you ended up marrying him?

[00:25:43.56]

JOAN BROWN: Yes. Right. So I just fell madly in love with him. And he was going to summer school. And it was that spring semester. And I was going to quit school. I thought, well, now I am going into the buying. I'm going to go work in a department store again, which I had done a little bit of selling when I was in high school.

[00:26:05.04]

And, you know, this—I can't. I have no talent. And he got all A's. He was great at all this stuff. Jeez, he could do any of those assignments and things. And I couldn't do any of them. And I thought, okay, fine. I have no talent. And that's how you feel in a certain environment. You don't know what art is. You have no idea. You just know what other people are doing and what your teachers tell you what your grades are. You think, jeez, I'm lousy. I'm in the wrong area.

[00:26:33.23]

So he said, "Oh, come on. This summer, I'm going to summer school." I said, okay, great. I want to nab this guy anyway. You know, maybe I'll meet somebody else during summer school. So I'm going to summer school. So I went to summer school. Again, my folks were willing to foot the bill, crazy as it was. And that summer school, we both—oh, there was a course called Landscape Painting, which we were eligible, being we'd had that first year of school and could take a painting class.

[00:27:06.50]

And it was taught by Elmer Bischoff, who had just come down from Marysville after his stint with junior high or whatever it was up there. Again, I can't be exact. Elmer's told me this, but I can't remember exactly what it is. And Bill said, "Oh, landscape painting is terrific. I love landscape painting. I'm going to take this. You want to take it?" I said, "Sure," thinking, jeez, I'll meet somebody else in this landscape painting class. So—well, that's how people think, right? Still, I would do the same thing.

[00:27:36.76]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: They always think that way.

[00:27:37.94]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah. So I took it. And here comes the teacher, Elmer. And I did what I usually do, feeling very embarrassed, very insignificant. I drew my stupid landscape. He took us somewhere, to Golden Gate Park or somewhere. Drew it in with a pencil on a canvas board. And he looked at it and we started painting. And I was painting very freely. I couldn't do things exact. God, I just didn't have any of that kind of control. And he said, "Pretty good." And I thought, what? Jeez, guy must be crazy. "Pretty good?"

[00:28:10.43]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: What do you expect from somebody who comes from Marysville? What do you expect?

[00:28:13.64]

JOAN BROWN: And then I really tuned in into Elmer. I really started sailing. Got very, very impressed with him. And just at the end of that summer, Bill and I were married. Just before this happened, something funny happened. I guess maybe it was between the end of summer school and the time we got married. Got married at the end of August, August 20, 1956. But somewhere between then, I got sick. I got mononucleosis. I was working terribly hard. I got very excited about painting. I got very skinny, down to 89 pounds. Very sick. And I was still living at home during this time.

[00:28:57.41]

And so Bill gave me a bunch of books on painting, the Impressionists, and more things on Rembrandts, and Goya, and Velázquez, and things. And while I was recuperating, I went through all these things. And I was just knocked out. I'd never seen any of this stuff. I just felt this tremendous surge of energy. And I said to myself, damn it, I would love to feel when I'm an old person the way these guys must feel.

[00:29:29.11]

And I don't mean "guys" in terms of male—because I've been asked this question very often being female—but as people. You know, over and over, I'm asked, "Well, weren't you resentful you didn't have female models?" I never thought of that, male or female, and I still don't. Art could be—things I'm struck by could be done by a gorilla, and I don't give a damn. You know, whatever it is, whatever goes into it, we're all from the same species, in terms of —

[00:29:56.16]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: I hope so.

[00:29:56.97]

JOAN BROWN: I hope so. Right. And you know, that's what comes across. And it was a tremendous sense of humanity in these damn things. And I thought, my God, these people must, at the end of their lives, whatever they may be, wherever their lives are cut off, must feel a tremendous sense of accomplishment and wonder at having put themselves forth, put into form all these feelings, and stuff.

[00:30:24.22]

And even then, jeez, I was seventeen years old, and I had a very clear idea, I think, of what went into these paintings in terms of putting forth this sense of humanity and feeling. I thought this is really what I want to do. If I could do this, this is what life's all about. This is really something I want to do. And it was like the light, you know, in the Bible where St. Paul —where God comes out and strikes Paul, and he falls on the—

[00:30:57.25]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: The scales fall from his eyes.

[00:30:59.58]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah, right.

[00:31:00.82]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Blind, and then he can see.

[00:31:02.50]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah. I really, really felt that way. It was a tremendous change in my whole being, which I have always proceeded to be affected by.

[00:31:12.58]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, so it was really the summer term, I gather.

[00:31:15.90]

JOAN BROWN: It was the summer term, yes—this, in culmination with working with Elmer, and then being exposed in this funny way to these crappy—these were little tiny books. They weren't like good reproductions or—

[00:31:28.11]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Yeah. Yeah.

[00:31:28.68]

JOAN BROWN: I just got this kind of energy from these things and made up my mind that this is something I really want to do, I have to do, and I need to do. This is my path or road, for better or worse. And again, it wasn't an, "I want to cut these guys, goddamn it, I can do better." There was none of that sort of thing. It's just, oh my God, what a wonderful expression of humanity. This particular expression, maybe this will fit me. I want it to. I think it might.

[00:31:59.52]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: So that was after a year at the Art Institute?

[00:32:01.03]

JOAN BROWN: Yes. It was after a year of utter discouragement. I was going to leave. And then these funny things happened, Elmer, and being exposed to—or no, not exposed, connecting to—well, I could have been exposed at any time during that year at the Institute. They had a wonderful library upstairs. It never interested me.

[00:32:20.11]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, so it's interesting, because it was all hanging on a very slender thread. You stayed on.

[00:32:25.26]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah. I only stayed because I was worried that Bill would—superficially, but I really stayed to find something, as you say. That's it.

[00:32:36.75]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Yeah. And so then you decided to come back in the fall and to—I mean, then it was quite clear that you wanted to be an artist.

[00:32:44.23]

JOAN BROWN: Right. I just threw myself entirely, as I tend to do—which can be negative as well as positive—into, you know, what I'm interested in—just literally threw myself in. Right away, the marriage started going to hell because this was not the basis on which it was set up on. And I just became extremely dedicated and worked my ass off. I had no talent whatsoever, no natural ability at anything. You can ask Elmer, or anyone else.

[00:33:16.84]

People have said it over the years. "Well, gee, you just succeeded. And you did a good job at an early age and stuff. You must be one of those talented people." Wiley was. There are people who were talented. Those guys have a harder time. It's harder for them. They get bored easier. If something doesn't come easy, you got to work your ass at it. And in a sense, you're better off. The other guys have to keep struggling, searching, searching, searching, or they, you know, lose touch with what they're doing. Diebenkorn has said that over and over again. He wished he was starting all over again.

[00:33:50.13]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: But it certainly isn't hard for him. And I can't imagine it ever was in the same way. I mean, there's a—

[00:33:56.28]

JOAN BROWN: No. But I was clumsy. I still am. I got to just [inaudible]. It's like pulling teeth a good portion of the time. I got to really pull out stuff. I'm not patting myself on the back. I'm just saying that's the way it has been. So I worked like hell that first year. And I just went one hundred percent into it.

[00:34:18.62]

And right from there, the marriage started, the relationship—as it should. There's nothing wrong with that. No regrets. Bill and I were very good for each other those early years. We both learned a lot, and parted friendly, and have remained friendly. We hardly ever see each other. He lives in Bristol, England. I think he's here right now. We'll see each other one of these days he's in the country. He usually calls.

[00:34:42.67]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Oh, terrific. Tell him about me.

[00:34:44.96]

JOAN BROWN: Oh, I will.

[00:34:46.00]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Yeah, exactly.

[00:34:47.24]

JOAN BROWN: Okay. Yeah.

[00:34:47.50]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: We should get his, you know, papers or whatever for the Archives.

[00:34:50.95]

JOAN BROWN: Sure.

[00:34:51.50]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Oh, you were at the Art Institute for five years.

[00:34:56.14]

JOAN BROWN: Right.

[00:34:58.81]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: And got your MA or MFA at—

[00:35:02.86]

JOAN BROWN: BFA and MFA.

[00:35:04.65]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Yeah, right. I mean, all the way through to what? I mean, you went as far as—

[00:35:09.23]

JOAN BROWN: You could go.

[00:35:09.99]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Okay. As far as you can go. It's apparent that Bischoff was the key figure. And does that hold true for your whole time at the—

[00:35:24.80]

JOAN BROWN: Yes, it does. At the Institute.

[00:35:26.60]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: You must have studied with some other—

[00:35:29.05]

JOAN BROWN: I enjoyed other people or got a great deal out of other people for other things. I liked Nate because he took us out to the zoo and Golden Gate Park and exposed us to—to the buffaloes out in Golden Gate Park, to animals, and exposed us just on class projects to different situations. But down deep and psychically, I never got the kind of energies or connections that I got from Elmer.

[00:35:54.85]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: But how can you explain that?

[00:35:55.66]

JOAN BROWN: That, of course, that takes two people. Elmer, although I'd never heard that kind of language, talked my language. He connected. And I could listen to him. I remember being in the gallery where he used to give his critiques as a class. We'd bring things into the gallery. That was the days when you could just take down whatever was hanging and put up your—lean against the walls, the class's stuff in a very casual situation.

[00:36:20.13]

And then he would talk, and I remember other people getting very bored and this and that. And I hated lectures all my life. I thought, what's the matter with me? These are things that are just connecting to me as an individual, that—you know, whereas, just abstractly, on the surface, I hate lectures. I hate talks. I've never listened to anybody, or had any respect, or paid any attention to anything anybody said all my life. And I'm eighteen years old. And here's somebody talking about art in a way that really touches and connects to me. And why these things happen, I don't know.

[00:36:57.99]

It's the same as recently, I've read a series of books. And I've read a lot of philosophies of, you know, why we exist, in terms of, oh, mysticism, religious stuff, all this and that, but

nothing ever means anything. And all of a sudden in the last year I read this series of books, the three books. Looking forward to if a fourth one comes out. That just means everything to me. And why that happens, I don't know. But this happened with Elmer.

[00:37:31.45]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: What books are they?

[00:37:32.41]

JOAN BROWN: These are the Seth books by a woman named Jane Roberts. The first one was *The Seth Material*. The next one was *Seth Speaks*. The next one was *The Nature of Personal Reality*. And as soon as I finished that last one, I called on the bookstore and I said, "Do you have another one?" They said, "Well, there might be one out in the fall."

[00:37:50.62]

And these are things I completely—attitudes, ideas, a lot of them far out, having to do with reincarnation, that I had never worked out in my own head or put in the form, that I just go along with one hundred percent, as if I'd heard them all my life. And here they are in form. And so my connection with Elmer was kind of like this, that he really talked my language, although I had no idea what my language was at all.

[00:38:20.01]

And other people's classes I really enjoyed. I got a lot from Frank in many different, diverse kind of ways. His classes were good, too. But Elmer talked my language although I hadn't heard it before, if that makes any sense, [inaudible], crazy things, something that fits. It's inside of you. And it's not like you're a tool, like you're just one of these mindless kind of wishy-washy disciples who just runs after this god and that god or anything. I would take different things from other people. But his language fit to an extent. As time passes, you leave things, and you discard or cast off other things and all this. And that's fine. That's healthy. And it's part of maturing, or individuating is maybe a better word.

[00:39:11.64]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Was there any—the California School of Fine Arts is probably most famous for the heyday of, say, a West Coast manifestation of Abstract Expressionism.

[00:39:27.16]

JOAN BROWN: Right. That's true.

[00:39:28.62]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: And was there still some residue?

[00:39:33.48]

JOAN BROWN: There was none at the time in that first year with the Bohemian people in there who I'd mentioned earlier. There was none of this. It was a Picasso-ish, taking off on Picasso, you know, the kind of crazy heads with three eyes and stuff like that, corny stuff, big blow up of apples and stuff. I'm trying to think of the actual stuff that—a lot of design problem kind of things blown up on canvas in a larger scale.

[00:40:02.24]

No. There was none. That [Abstract Expressionism –Ed.] had gone. That had more—they had gone on, I guess, to develop whatever it was they were doing, because the school was in a slump. Why the hell would they want to stay there anyway? Most of these guys have been fired or quit out of protest and things. So the school was in a funny transition. So the people who were there were in a very kind of ambiguous stage. None of that existed.

[00:40:28.07]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: So there wasn't a party line, really?

[00:40:30.08]

JOAN BROWN: No. None. None when I was there. And it could have gone flat. It could have—That's the wind.

[00:40:35.23]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Yeah.

[00:40:36.90]

JOAN BROWN: It could have gone the other way and just gone closed. Closed. That was a good possibility of the school at that time, of closing up. So then Elmer came and renewed this kind of freedom. Yeah. There's [inaudible] there if you want it. Yeah. There's two half gallons.

[00:40:58.06]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: That's enough. That'll [inaudible].

[00:41:04.02]

JOAN BROWN: So anyway, so he comes. Okay. That first year is good. Now over to arts and crafts, there was a group of people. So, he came in '56. Okay. In '57, he was well respected by guys teaching over at Arts and Crafts. Diebenkorn was there. Oh, I forget who else.

[00:41:28.57]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Diebenkorn was over at Arts and Crafts?

[00:41:30.40]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah. Right. And there was a group of people, Manuel Neri and a guy named Mike Downes, Hank Villierme. These were all guys who were important in structuring that school at that time. Ira Yeager's a little bit secondary from that. Bernice Bing, a couple of girls involved in there, studying over there. And they heard of Elmer from Diebenkorn, from these other people as being a fantastic teacher and a real good man, and much into this Expressionism, which they were more or less into from who was there at Arts and Crafts—which was Diebenkorn and a guy named Goldyne. I forget his first name. It's not that important.

[00:42:15.14]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: That's [inaudible].

[00:42:18.10]

JOAN BROWN: So they came over. They came over and they took a class. I believe it's on Friday afternoon. At that time, you could take any—you could take a three-hour class. You didn't have to, you know, be enrolled on any program. And so I made friends with them. They were very impressed with Elmer, and his loose way of teaching, and his dedication. And so eventually, most of these—well, all of them, the ones I just mentioned, dropped out of Arts and Crafts and came over and signed up full time.

[00:42:46.63]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Yeah. Diebenkorn was—

[00:42:48.44]

JOAN BROWN: Diebenkorn came later.

[00:42:49.87]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: But he was at Arts and Crafts still.

[00:42:51.86]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah. But he did come over to the Institute.

[00:42:54.53]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Where was David Park, at Cal?

[00:42:56.44]

JOAN BROWN: David Park was at Cal. He had just gone to Cal.

[00:42:59.77]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: From the Art Institute?

[00:43:01.36]

JOAN BROWN: Well, no. He must have been there a few years prior. I shouldn't say "just" went.

[00:43:05.71]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Yeah. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:43:06.31]

JOAN BROWN: But he was over there. And I would see—Elmer would bring him over to my studio, and he would make comments, and stuff like this. Yes. I knew he'd come into the graduate seminars all the time. Anyway, Elmer and Gurdon Woods got in cahoots. And Gurdon wanted Elmer. Elmer was full of energy. Elmer got rid of a lot of the deadwood. He fired a lot of the people, and they were pissed off. And the students who were pissed off about this went elsewhere and stuff—and rightly so, because these were crappy teachers. As I say, I had them. [Laughs.] And I've been teaching a long time now. I can honestly say—I'm not prejudiced—these were shitty teachers.

[00:43:47.67]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: You don't have to answer this, but it's an interesting point.

[00:43:53.30]

JOAN BROWN: I will, I don't mind.

[00:43:54.26]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Now, Nathan Oliveira was teaching at the Institute at the same time.

[00:43:58.58]

JOAN BROWN: Right. Yeah.

[00:44:00.05]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: And I don't think it's any dark secret that he was not in with—

[00:44:05.87]

JOAN BROWN: Elmer and Frank.

[00:44:06.86]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: —Elmer, and Frank, especially. And you mentioned that Elmer was in a position to sort of prune a little bit, the faculty at the Art Institute.

[00:44:19.88]

JOAN BROWN: No, Elmer at that time was supportive of Nate, if that's what—

[00:44:22.35]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: He was?

[00:44:22.84]

JOAN BROWN: It was Frank who was the troublemaker.

[00:44:25.53]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Yeah.

[00:44:26.00]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah. It was Frank.

[00:44:27.51]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Because I certainly—I gather from what you said earlier that you didn't feel that Nate fit into this category of certainly a deadwood.

[00:44:35.33]

JOAN BROWN: Oh, no. No. Not at all.

[00:44:37.38]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: And yet the establishment at the Art Institute or elements of it felt he didn't—

[00:44:42.53]

JOAN BROWN: No. Nate gave me—or Nate and Frank, I got as much from both of them—I wouldn't say one was—It's just that Elmer spoke my language. That's the only difference. Somebody else would come along and say, maybe Wiley or someone else and say, "Gee, it was Nate, or—." "It was Frank who spoke my language." And you know, I'm not saying one was better than the other. It just depends on who you who you relate and connect to.

[00:45:06.96]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: But it was a very interesting time there, because some of the students—without making any kind of historical judgments—some of the students from that period, maybe even more so, or as much as the famous years at the Art Institute (meaning '45 to '50) have emerged as strong forces. And it's a period that, well, as I say, doesn't have the same glamour as that strong—

[00:45:42.38]

JOAN BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. But it's very weighty. Right. And this will, I think, eventually, well, what you're doing and stuff—come out and then get distorted, like everything else does.

[00:45:52.73]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: That's right. Well, we try.

[00:45:53.99]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah. So anyway, between Elmer and Gurdon, they got rid of a lot of the deadwood. And then Elmer brought in other people. Frank, at that time, I believe, was cooking over at the Gladhand Restaurant in Sausalito, which now is now closed.

[00:46:15.38]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Frank Lobdell?

[00:46:16.16]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah. Frank was a cook with Walt Kuhlman over there. They cooked steaks and stuff. Yeah. And Elmer brought him in to teach. And you know, gee, Frank was good. I

mean, he was terrific. I've thought a great deal of Frank. Dogmatic as hell. What I liked about Frank at the time, he'd come on all this way and that way, and just so goddamn down the line. Then he'd get drunk [laughs] as hell. And it would be all—he'd be a big slob. And so there was a human. Oh, terrible slob. Yeah. Real human beings. We could relate to him, too. And Nate, as I say, would take us out to the park. And then gradually, the commercial art program just got shot to hell. No longer there.

[00:47:04.99]

But people started coming all over. As I say, at first, they came when Elmer was there. And these people came from Arts and Crafts. And jeez, they added a lot of energy to the place. There was a lot of vitality. And it was like a family among us. And it was a very good feeling. On one hand, it was hard, too, for many people to break away from.

[00:47:25.51]

I don't think I had that much of a hard time because I remained in the area and, you know, eventually had my child, and went my own life, and didn't hang on in that sense. I didn't go somewhere else to make a new life, but I stayed here and kind of got diverted with my own life, and grew and changed. And so I didn't have any problem. A lot of people did have, because it was such a tightly structured kind of thing. A lot of my students—as you know, I teach graduate seminars from time to time. We rotate at Cal and we do, you know, undergraduates.

[00:48:03.17]

And finally, you get maybe—once every year you get to a seminar, and they ask me about those times because they are so glamorized. And I always say it was very—on one hand, it was nice there. It was very safe. And it was a family kind of situation. We did have nice exchanges and nice feelings. Oh, God, we would have done anything for each other. Really supportive.

[00:48:28.99]

On the other hand, it was too goddamn incestuous and too tight. And there was one way of working, and that was it. And if you weren't within this particular confine or whatever the right word is—this group of people, that your work was no good. There was no room, allowance for anything other than what was happening right at the time. And nowadays, my God, my people might be all not relating and removed from each other, but, jeez, there's a lot of individual kind of things going on. And it sort of points out that there's no good, there's no bad, nothing's better than anything else. Just do the best you can with what the hell you're doing. And that's a lot healthier. It's a lot easier when you get out of school having that kind of situation.

[00:49:19.49]

A lot of people went down the drain. Again, that's one's own choice. My God, we all have a choice of surviving. So I can't say—some people I know are very bitter and say that goddamn school at that time, and even five years after, suffocated, and drowned, and stifled so many people. I don't feel that way. I say, damn it, it's up to them. They had a choice, as everyone else does. Either, you know, shit or get off the pot, as the saying goes.

[00:49:45.45]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Right.

[00:49:45.89]

JOAN BROWN: And that might sound a little hard, but that's how I feel about it. So that had a disadvantage. But during the time, it was a marvelous feeling. And for me, it was the first family I ever had, because I didn't feel that way at home. I didn't feel that way in school. And we used to do all crazy kind of things that were really exciting. Like once a month, we would go down—there was a jazz club on Vallejo and—no, Green off of Columbus called The Cellar, not far from the school. And we used to go there and drink. And that's where jazz and poetry got started.

[00:50:22.64]

And we became friends with a guy who would go there to drink. He'd said, "Hey, put some paintings in the front or some sculpture," or what have you. So once a month, we would carry up from the school our stuff and put it there and have an opening and drink. Everyone else in the school would show up. And then the poets would come and the musicians.

[00:50:40.71]

And there was this really nice interaction of what was called Bohemian San Francisco. But we would carry these damn things up the street. And I remember Bill Brown got his dad, who was a construction guy, to shoot a bunch of slats with one of those guns that really shoots them in there and make this foyer, or how you pronounce it, foyer, really nice to show the stuff. And we'd change the shows once a month.

[00:51:05.99]

And then other things that we did as a group, which were neat, we used to—everyone who was on the G.I. Bill—and we were put—if you worked hard enough, you got a studio spot. And sometimes it was very crowded, and you only had a little bit of a spot. This was in room 15. And I was put in there after a couple of years. And this is where it gets into sexism. There was no—it was 90 percent guys, but I was in there because I worked my ass off. And you were just put in there if you really needed and deserved a studio because you worked hard.

[00:51:41.13]

And in fact, there was two or three—one was a Chinese woman, Bernice Ding. And another one was a woman in her fifties, a rich society woman, named Jeanne Loud, who worked her ass off, too. And she was in there with all these nutty people, Manuel and this other guy, Bob Downes, and stuff.

[00:52:00.47]

So once a month when those guys got paid, when the G.I. Bill came in, and my ex-husband Bill Brown, when he came in on a Friday when the paycheck came in, we would go down five, five-thirty, and get a bottle of gin and get a bottle of vermouth and have martinis. And we'd have our cocktail hour once a month. And that was nice, and look at each other's paintings and stuff. But we really had a lot of fun. And it was just a wonderful atmosphere.

[00:52:28.17]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Where were you living with Bill Brown?

[00:52:31.19]

JOAN BROWN: Bill? Three blocks away over on Filbert, off of Taylor in a marvelous garden apartment. My God, times have changed, forty-five bucks a month. And it was that you walk through an alleyway. And this apartment was owned by Chinese. You know, off the street, there was this huge apartment. There was an alleyway. It was 973. And we'd walk in this alleyway, and there were buckets of jasmine plants. You know, when those things are in bloom, my God, what a smell all throughout this alley. Walk all through this.

[00:53:03.35]

And in the back, we had an apartment with a huge, enormous kitchen the whole size of this, and a bedroom, and a workroom place where we built stretcher bars, a workroom, and bathroom. We paid forty-five dollars, including utilities. And then there was a huge garden. It was what was called a garden apartment, garden attached to the whole building. And a big white rabbit lived out there who was my friend, who I cultivated with lettuce, and carrots, and things like that. It was really nice, forty-five bucks.

[00:53:33.26]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: But your studio was at the—

[00:53:34.94]

JOAN BROWN: School.

[00:53:35.55]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: At school.

[00:53:36.00]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah.

[00:53:38.85]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: I gather from what you say that during these years the menu at the Art Institute was somehow, well, what we would say is Bay Area figurative.

[00:53:50.23]

JOAN BROWN: Right. And we fed each other. And some people worked more figuratively, but yet in this same kind of expressionistic, heavy paint, violent way of approaching the imagery. And others, the subject matter was with either abstract or totally not there at all, just surface.

[00:54:15.30]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: And so the life class must have taken on a much greater importance—

[00:54:20.01]

JOAN BROWN: Oh, my God.

[00:54:20.25]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: —than it had, say, during the AE period with Still, and people like that.

[00:54:27.22]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah. Well, it was looser in a sense—well, I had—the first year, I had that life drawing class that I hated with Roger Barr, who I didn't like either. I don't care if any of this is out for the public or not.

[00:54:40.86]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, they'll never hear it.

[00:54:41.07]

JOAN BROWN: Well, he might, but he can go to hell anyway. So anyway.

[00:54:45.49]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: [Laughs.] Terrific.

[00:54:46.87]

JOAN BROWN: You know, he would just have do all this gimmick stuff. It was fake. Draw a circle, warm up with your left hand. There were all these attempts at loosening up.

[00:54:55.87]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Draw behind your back a circle like Michelangelo. Right? Something like that.

[00:55:00.83]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah. Draw with the left hand, ovals. Draw with the right hand, ovals. Pretend you're an ant. Follow the contour blob with your left hand.

[00:55:09.83]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Oh, that's great.

[00:55:09.91]

JOAN BROWN: All this crap. It was mindless. There was no point to it. I could see where somebody could have something like that and direct it towards a certain goal or have a point of view, but this was just mindless. It didn't mean a goddamn thing. So anyway, here comes these other people. And this is a more expressive, freer period. And yet in many ways it was more disciplinary. Even Dorr Bothwell said, "Don't you dare spill your water on your drawing. How dare you do this? Look at Joan's drawings." You know, "The example of a real clod."

[00:55:51.12]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: But all and all it was, after that first year, then, a very—what shall we say, enriching experience for you.

[00:55:58.75]

JOAN BROWN: Very. Super. And I stayed on because—

[00:56:00.84]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: You got a great deal from the—

[00:56:02.58]

JOAN BROWN: Oh, tremendous. And I stayed on not to get—I had no intentions of going into—it never crossed my mind going into teaching. I was living from one day to the next and only in terms of being so excited about painting and discovering, my God, first time a way of really being comfortable of expressing myself and where other people were doing the same thing. And I just kept on with school because I wanted to stay in school. And so I ended up with a BFA.

[00:56:31.68]

And then I wanted to keep on going to school. And it was the first year that they had the master's. And that was very enriching too because I became a little more insightful during that year. And I was one of the people that went through the first year of the master program and got out in a year. Gee, now it's hard to get out anywhere in a year in a master's program.

[00:56:54.07]

And this was so enriching because a lot of guest people came in during the time, whoever happened to be teaching at Cal. It mainly done through Park, who was Elmer's tight close friend. And I remember just such a valuable experience of—I knew Elmer and David Park were very close friends and influenced each other and all this and that. And I had met David many times on social occasions because see, then the faculty, and the students, it was small. And we were kind of tight and all this stuff. And I don't mean, you know, where you were sleeping together or anything like that, but, you know, as friends. You were tight. That's the way it was during that era.

[00:57:35.89]

So anyway, here comes Park to a seminar. I think Park had been at my studio, and made some very positive comments, which Elmer had agreed with. So I was up that week of graduate school, which means you bring your paintings. And David was the guest lecturer. And here was Elmer and David.

[00:57:59.42]

And David said, "I just love these." Elmer said, "I can't stand them." These are my paintings. Although Elmer, that wasn't that out front of "I can't stand them." "I don't think they work," because of such and such. But David said, "Well, they do." And here are these two guys just at odds, these friends that have the same attitude, and stuff. And we were all sitting there like we're absolutely shocked, and very angry, and very disappointed, and very depressed because, my God, where do you go to now?

[00:58:27.95]

You know, you thought you knew what was right and what was wrong. And here's two guys who think the same way, and they're disagreeing. And it was one of the most valuable experiences. I grew up a lot. After that, I thought, well, damn it—not right at that time but, you know, fine, you're left with yourself. You make your own choices. And that was very good experience.

[00:58:49.45]

That whole year of graduate school went that way. And by the time—and I did end up with a MFA. I got teaching accidentally as a way of making a living, which is a damn good, comfortable way for me to make a living. And anyway, it was the whole school experience was terrific, but I was damn glad to get out by the time I got out. [Laughs.]

[00:59:12.91]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, who were your heroes during this period? We're talking again about, well, '55 to '60, the second part of the decade.

[00:59:23.41]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah. Three main ones. And that is Rembrandt, Goya, Velázquez. And I know what you're asking in terms of contemporary people—

[00:59:32.32]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: But that's interesting, too.

[00:59:32.53]

JOAN BROWN: —but these guys continued, and continue, and still are to be the people that I turn to.

[00:59:44.14]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: So, the old masters—Rembrandt, Goya, and Velázquez?

[00:59:47.20]

JOAN BROWN: And at that time, de Kooning and Francis Bacon were the contemporary ones.

[00:59:51.77]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: So you were familiar with figures outside of the Bay area, obviously.

[00:59:58.01]

JOAN BROWN: Yes. By the time '57, '58 came around, art magazines were available to us at the Institute. And I don't mean necessarily in the library, but people would bring them in, and we would certainly go through them. And jeez, I just loved abstract. I just loved all that wild kind of crazy stuff, you know, pouring paint on surfaces, and was really knocked out. And then, of course, the dealer Staempfli came in '59 to San Francisco and took some things of mine. And I had a show that fall.

[01:00:37.07]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: A whole other topic. Right.

[01:00:38.62]

JOAN BROWN: And then I had that show. And I went back to New York. And I saw a lot of this stuff, too, and some I didn't like as much as I had in reproductions and other stuff I did like. But to answer your question, the main influence is and has been those three people.

[01:00:57.14]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Uh-huh [affirmative]. Well, what about the locals? Just trying to get a degree of influence at that time. Bischoff as a teacher and as a person, and I assume his work?

[01:01:11.06]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah. To an extent.

[01:01:12.63]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: What about Diebenkorn?

[01:01:15.23]

JOAN BROWN: Not that much.

[01:01:16.25]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Not that much. He was still a pretty young guy, I guess.

[01:01:18.95]

JOAN BROWN: No. No. He was very, very heavy around the area and influenced mainly a lot of people from Arts and Crafts. I would say someone like Manuel was just knocked out—wiped out. I don't mean that in a negative way. But no. He was very heavy an influence and intellectually a lot—see, I don't like that much stuff. You know, intellectually, I do, but, emotionally, I don't. I don't respond to that much stuff. And I never responded that strongly to Diebenkorn's stuff.

[01:01:53.16]

Lobdell certainly was an influence. But again, it wasn't any lasting kind of thing. Elmer's—I think I liked him so damn much, I probably like his stuff more because of this. De Kooning's "Woman" series I really did emotionally, genuinely respond to. Bacon, a painting that I saw in the area, and this includes anyone who was working at that time, was the painting at the Legion, which they probably had by accident. They had such shitty shows and continue to. There was a dog painting by Bacon, which I must have seen.

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[00:00:04.99]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Joan Brown, reel two, side one. Picking up—let's see, we were talking about your experience at the Art Institute—California School of Fine Arts. It seems that your basic analysis of the experience was that it was a very good one, a very positive one. With the Bay Area, if any style was holding sway there at the Art Institute, it was the Bay Area Figurative School. It seems to me we're talking about admired figures, heroes, so to speak.

[00:00:54.36]

JOAN BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:00:55.93]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: And you mentioned three old masters, and then seemed to give them much more importance than your actual teachers or contemporary artists here in the Bay Area.

[00:01:06.98]

JOAN BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:01:10.35]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Is there anything else that—getting into that?

[00:01:13.92]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah. Right, I think we had just stopped the tape on the note of that Francis Bacon. And I was saying in terms of contemporary art, there was not very much that was either a lasting influence, or even momentarily, that much of a knockout, although the de Kooning women were. This is mentioned on earlier part of this tape, and I think a few other people were.

[00:01:48.80]

But gee, here was that show at the Legion. And there was a painting of that damn dog in that room, that dog on the funny perspective, on four feet, front feet spread out, looking up—this funny aerial perspective of looking down the checkerboard floor. And that just knocked the hell out of me. And this was somewhere between '57 and '59. I can't remember exactly. It could have been '58, to just pin it down. And that made a tremendous impact upon me.

[00:02:23.90]

And Bacon has remained one of my very, very favorite and exciting contemporary artists to this day. I wish I could have got to see a show this month in New York, but couldn't afford to go—his big show at the Met. But he hasn't been shown very much around this area, in the Bay Area. UC Museum has one. And as I say, I saw that one there. I've seen a few in New York, at the Marlborough and at the Whitney, in a group show way back in the '60s. That's about it. But I followed him in terms of reproductions and catalogs. And that's about it in terms of contemporary art.

[00:03:08.26]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, what is it—let's try to be a little more specific. I know it's hard to do, but in the case of Bacon, what is it that—

[00:03:17.50]

JOAN BROWN: His hardness, his unyielding imagery and his simplicity. For me, it's the utmost in simplicity. There's nothing there that isn't necessary. I don't have to wade through a lot of stuff to get to, for me, what is the core. That doesn't mean that is the core. Someone else, someone sitting next to me may see the core of his work as something else. The core, to me, is his connection and sympathy and anger, understanding, et cetera, whatever et cetera is, of humanity, of the world about him.

[00:04:04.72]

And it doesn't necessarily take place in the imagery that he represents, because I really believe imagery is a vehicle, a vehicle for all these feelings and insights and thoughts and ideas that we have about the world around us. His imagery happens to be the particular world that he deals with, which certainly isn't my world. But he hits on many of the things that I feel and want to hit on myself. And he does it.

[00:04:37.10]

I feel de Kooning did it to a great extent, in the "Woman" series; that Goya and Velázquez did it, and Rembrandt, of course, very frequently. And he cut through a lot of the crap that I have to wade through nowadays to look at a lot of paintings. Once I finally get there, very often, I do not find these essential elements that tell about the people that I'm looking for, if that makes any sense.

[00:05:09.61]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Yeah, it does. So I gather that you're much less interested in formalism for its own sake?

[00:05:19.01]

JOAN BROWN: Oh, yeah, not at all. But I'm also not interested in—and again, this is no putdown. I respect, very strongly, a lot of the Bay Area art. I respect Wiley. I respect De Forest, all these people. They've worked a long time. Their heart's in the right place as artists. They mean well. They're damn serious. But emotionally, I don't respond at all to what they do. This has no indication that I feel, as an artist, these are bad artists. I think they're very good, good artists.

[00:05:47.11]

But again, I have to wade through, I have to go through so much. And my personality is such that I'm very impatient, and neither want to take the time, as many people do, to go through a lot of doors to get to something. I want, you know, the most, utmost simplicity that I can find there to grasp these other elements that excite me, or stimulate, or give me energy, or whatever is the right expression for what I'm trying to say. And I get distracted going through all this superfluous stuff.

[00:06:30.08]

And with formalism, I feel that many of these humane elements I'm looking for have been eliminated, that are not there. There's just the one side, is the intellectual side. This doesn't have to do with all formalism. Albers—I've seen Albers, where I'm very, very emotionally turned on to, and stimulated by. And it's not just an idea. I think people are much more than just ideas.

[00:07:04.97]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, with Bacon, though, I think the appeal is quite obvious, that it's a very direct expressionism. You can see the legacy, maybe, of Goya, who's another admired figure in terms of this very direct expression. What about the German Expressionists? Well, what about Munch, or somebody like that?

[00:07:40.26]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah, people have linked some of my work to these guys—people collected it, or my dealers. I'm thinking of a past dealer mentioned this very strongly. And yet I have felt no real identification with these people. Again, I admire the work intellectually. I like a lot of the stuff I've seen of Munch's. But again, I don't get emotionally charged by it. It's more of an intellectual understanding or appreciation or admiration. But I don't get turned on by it.

[00:08:17.90]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: What is it about—Rembrandt, I can see. What about Velázquez? How does he fit?

[00:08:28.19]

JOAN BROWN: Oh, for me, there's a tremendous humane kind of feeling I get from his stuff, of the portraits that he paints—the portraits of the nobility, the aristocrats with the dogs. And very often, there's a funny kind of thing where the dog is either watching or looking at—he fit that dog in in a narrow corner. And I have been very influenced and taken off, sometimes literally, sometimes to no advantage, where I have to take these damn dogs out; other times where they've remained. I have two collages—one's in the living room over the fireplace—which are direct takeoffs and copies of, in a different medium, of course, in a collage—ratty, funky collage—but of the two Velázquez dogs.

[00:09:18.50]

But he has these dogs relating either to the people, or relating off on a different level. And the people are somewhere else. And there's this funny—no action that causes this interaction. Or there is an interaction, and there's a crazy kind of size relationship often in these things. But there's a tremendous humanity, I feel, towards that. For me, he brings out in describing these people, whether they're aristocrats, whether he hates them or holds them in contempt—nevertheless, there's still, in spite of that, some kind of sympathy and connection to these people, and very much so to the animals.

[00:10:03.51]

And this is described to me in the way that he will handle—maybe it might not be a face, an eye, a nose, or a mouth, but in the way he'll handle a garment. It's not cold. It's not abstract. It's not working with the garment. It's very much to do with the person. But he might only do it through the vehicle of a certain gesture or the way a garment falls, if that, again, makes any sense.

[00:10:29.06]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: It does to me. [Moving furniture.] Gordon moved this.

[00:10:36.46]

Well, let's see. We're still moving, trying to stick to some chronology, which isn't absolutely necessary, but I suppose is helpful, within that period of the Art Institute. And you said that you actually went to—that your first visit to Europe was during this time, just after you received your—

[00:11:11.13]

JOAN BROWN: BFA, yeah.

[00:11:12.75]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: And then you went—what can you tell me about that? Did you go with—well, you tell me.

[00:11:22.78]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah, I went with Manuel. We went to Europe. At that point, I was on a stipend from Staempfli, the art dealer in New York. And I was receiving $300 a month. And I saved it up because I didn't need that much. I was teaching, working at, oh, God, this hideous private high school for rich children, earning $117 a month, teaching five days a week, although the teaching time was only maybe two or three hours. It took time to get there, time to get back.

But I was painting before I left, painting when I came back. It was very intimidating. The old lady was an alcoholic. Again, it was a very bizarre kind of situation, absurd, somewhat—as absurd as the situation, I felt, I was raised in as a child. And it was very crazy. So I had money from that source. I was getting $300 a month from the dealer.

[00:12:25.24]

Manuel was teaching, I believe, one class at the Institute. He was making some money. Anyway, we went to Europe for these three months. We went to New York first, and that was my second time in New York. And I liked New York. The first time I went there, I knew well enough after three weeks that I didn't want to live there. The energy, pace was too damn fast for me, too stimulating. Here, I could call my shots. I could be stimulated or not, as I wanted to. But there, it was too heavy. I didn't want that. I wanted to be more of a recluse. So I realized then that my place was here in the Bay Area.

[00:13:13.96]

Anyway, then we spent a couple weeks in New York. Then we got on a boat. We went to Europe. And I loved that boat. And I went crazy on the boat, and was just absolutely wild for whatever, the five days that it was, that it took us to cross—had a wild romance on the boat, and was just absolutely obnoxious [laughs] the whole—won dance contests and stuff like that.

[00:13:39.37]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Wild romance with Manuel?

[00:13:41.44]

JOAN BROWN: No, no, no, I was with—it was somebody else. We had just a marvelous time. It was the first time I hadn't painted. It was in this art situation for a number of years since I started. And there I was, just on the high seas, just eating and drinking and sunning and swimming. And I just was absolutely wild within that realm—great fun.

[00:14:14.04]

So anyway, we got to Europe. And one of the goals was to stay at Staempfli's place, George Staempfli, the art dealer in New York, who had a house on the Costa Brava. And we were to stay there as long as we wanted. We could have stayed there for three months—he had a very fancy house, and right near Marcel Duchamp, and Dalí lived there—or was it Max Ernst?

Who's the other guy? Oh, God, terrible memory. Maybe I'll think of it afterwards—Man Ray, Man Ray. That was the guy. Yeah, he had a house there.

[00:14:53.55]

And so we went directly there from the boat. We took a train. We took a train into Barcelona, some overnight deal. And finally, we got to Cadaqués, on the Costa Brava, and stayed at Staempfli's very fancy place, where you pressed a button for the maids to come in and pick up your towel off the bathroom floor. That's how fancy, how rich it was. And we were waited on hand and foot. And we lasted there a couple of weeks because it was very tight. And we didn't like that, although we ended up going back there. But he was gone, and just his wife was there. And then it was looser. We had more fun at the end of the summer.

[00:15:35.35]

So from there, we went to Barcelona and then to Madrid. And at the Prado, I experienced just a knockout experience, seeing those Goyas and the Velázquez. And the only other comparable experience I had after that was when my child was born, which I was totally awake and conscious of. And it was that kind of enlightening, changing, just dramatic type of experience. And that's the only way I can describe it, is as a similar experience of having a baby. [They laugh.]

[00:16:18.25]

You know, all of a sudden, there's this light. There you are—and it was in a hospital. And I was on the operating table, and I was wide awake. And I had a spinal to cut the pain, which I'm certainly not sorry for, and probably would have again because I don't like pain—but totally conscious. And there is, same as preceding, there's a baby. And jeez, when I saw those Goyas and the Velázquez, too, it was unbelievably moving.

[00:16:49.76]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: And how did it happen that Staempfli invited you two? Was this just a great favor?

[00:16:55.50]

JOAN BROWN: Oh, total coincidence.

[00:17:01.07]

Yeah, have some wine. Right there—put that, mix it in this one. Take—Total coincidence—definitely came out to the Bay Area to see David Park in 1959. And I guess I was just finishing up the BFA, Bachelor of Fine Arts. And we were living next door to Wally and Jay Hedrick-DeFeo. We had a door between the two houses. He was an old friend of Nell Sinton's.

[00:17:37.39]

And Staempfli had been curator down at Houston Museum—Dallas? I have no—somewhere down in Texas, at some museum—and therefore had come in contact with David Park, and liked what David Park was doing, went to New York, and started a gallery. But before the gallery was opened, he decided to pick up David Park, and had heard that there were other West Coast people—had certainly heard of Elmer, and I guess Diebenkorn and stuff, but had had contact with Park, and came out here to look at David Park's.

[00:18:14.12]

Went to Park's, saw Elmer, got in touch, serious touch with Elmer, decided to pick up some paintings from Elmer, and then contacted an old friend, Nell Sinton. And they were just talking about what's going on around. And she brought them over to the Hedrick-DeFeo house, which we lived right next to, with this communal door, which was just—

[00:18:36.41]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: On Fillmore.

[00:18:37.04]

JOAN BROWN: —hated, on Fillmore. Yeah, awful. God. [Laughs.] And I was painting in my studio. And all of a sudden, the door opened. And in comes this man with Wally and Jay. And it was Mr. Staempfli. And he said, "May I see some paintings?" You know, I'm in the middle of a painting. Of course, I was young. Now, I would be much less polite. But at the time, I was—I said, "Sure."

[00:19:04.77]

And I showed him some paintings. And he said, "I'll give you $300 for two of these paintings." I said, "You're kidding." And everyone else was like, "You're kidding." And he wrote a check. And we thought he was a phony. My dad, who was still working at the Bank of America—gee, I brought that check down. He said, "Oh, I'm sure this is phony. You know, who'd want this—

[00:19:23.46]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: "Who'd want to buy this? "

[00:19:24.14]

JOAN BROWN: —for your painting?" Yeah, and he called New York, and he checked it, too, and Chase Manhattan Bank or whatever. And no, it was real. And so he had the painting sent. And then he wrote me a letter, and he bought four more, four for a thousand bucks, I guess. And then a few months later, he said—and he opened that fall with a show of David Park.

[00:19:49.49]

And then he wrote and said—after he'd gotten the four more plus the two, he said, "I want more. And I want you to show this following January or February." And I said, "Fine," because I work regularly, and still do. And yeah, I had to work and stuff. And so then that went off. And I went back, first time in New York, and just loved it to pieces. But I say even then, somehow, some way, as dumb as I was, knew this was not the environment, that the pace—now, I can put it very simply—the energy, pace was too fast, and something that would disrupt my own energies.

[00:20:31.91]

But Staempfli and I became very good friends. And then he invited me to stay in his place in Cadaqués, in Europe. Elmer was there, too, I think a year or so later, spent some time with his wife there, too. And it was very romantic and all this. And it was very boring, too. I couldn't wait to get out. But the Prado was where—

[00:21:00.47]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, did you travel elsewhere in Europe at that time?

[00:21:04.29]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah, we went all over Spain. And that was great fun. We'd just get on buses, naturally. We were young and had no responsibilities whatsoever. And we'd just get on buses and trains, riding third classes. And it was so crazy because you could say, "I want to get off here," and we'd just get off. You know, we'd get on again. I mean, it wasn't even an official stop. You just go up, you tell the conductor, Spanish conductor, "I want to get off." You'd get out. So we'd stay there two days, maybe a week at the most, and we'd get back on something and go somewhere else.

[00:21:40.82]

And after we left Spain, we went to Italy, which I loved. Oh, took a crazy train ride from Barcelona to Rome, which was unbelievable. And our luggage was lost there. That was really, really great fun. That was a very extravagant kind of situation. Our luggage got on with us. And we were going to Rome. And as I say, I was getting that $300 a month from Staempfli. And it was set up where I was collecting it at these different banks around Europe. And it was the money for the month waiting for me in Rome there.

[00:22:20.67]

So anyway, we had our luggage. We got on the train. And it was kind of cold in Barcelona. I was wearing a heavy sweater, some denim pants. And we got on there. We were going third class, as we usually went. And it got more and more and more crowded. So we were just crammed into this little, tiny compartment where my legs were up. My legs were up the entire time. My ankles started swelling like that. It was hotter and hotter. And I had this sweater on. Now, I would just take it off. And if nobody liked it, they could, you know, go to hell. But at the time, I did not do that. And nuns were on it. People were eating there and drinking. It was really bizarre. And the smells were just awful. And it was hotter and hotter and hotter. It goes from France into Italy.

[00:23:02.08]

We finally got there. And I could barely walk. My ankles were just huge. And we went to pick up our luggage. And the luggage had gone on in a different car. And it had been let off at the French-Spanish border. So they said, "Okay, fine, we'll fix it for you. But for a few days, you're not going to have any luggage," you know, no money, anything. Luckily, we went to a certain bank there, and the money, the check, the monthly check from Staempfli was waiting. And so we had the money.

[00:23:31.00]

So we're at the American counsel. And we had nothing, just the clothes we're wearing. So we meet someone that we knew from the Art Institute at the American counsel. And he said, "Hey, you want to go to the opera to see *Aida* tomorrow night?" Well, we'd love to. "We'll buy the tickets." "Well, we'd love to, but we don't have any clothes and stuff." And so I had this money. I said, "Oh, come on, Manny, let's go buy some clothes and go to the opera," because this was spectacular. It was out of doors. It's just extravagant—all the elephants and all this with *Aida*. So that was great fun, spending, wasting all that money. So for me, it was just a luxurious experience of going above the Spanish Steps, going into one of these marvelous beauty salons where they had little busboys who were like the old Philip Morris guys—

[00:24:23.92]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Right, with the little caps?

[00:24:24.04]

JOAN BROWN: —with the little flat hats, and yeah, little gray suits, with the Mandarin clothes, and bringing you drinks and all this. And so I had the whole works, my hair dyed, and as I said, eyelashes dyed, the makeup job, everything, which took all day long, and—no, half a day because then I went to all these shops, these boutiques. Go in, and you have dresses shown to you. There's nothing hanging. You just sit in an open room like this. And people come in and model dresses. You say, "I like that." They don't fit. And then they tailor them right there to suit you. And then go to a lingerie shop, and shoe shop, and all this, and just spent a hell of a lot of money. It was just great fun. And then we went to, all just decked out like celebrities, to the opera, *Aida*, that night. And that was really a neat experience, extravagant experience in 1960 or '61.

[00:25:20.98]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, that was—after, you actually then got your MFA. This was after—

[00:25:25.87]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah, I'm wrong. It's not between the BFA and the MFA. It was right after I got —before I started teaching. I'm sorry about that. I get confused during those years.

[00:25:36.85]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Because you were—here I am, playing chronologist.

[00:25:42.02]

JOAN BROWN: No, please do. I get mixed up.

[00:25:45.13]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: You were married to Bill Brown '56 to '60, if I'm—yeah. And so this—

[00:25:50.59]

JOAN BROWN: No, three years, '56 to '59. We were only married three years.

[00:25:55.54]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Brenda made a mistake.

[00:25:57.61]

JOAN BROWN: No, we got legally divorced when I was—well, see, maybe I'm going on when we were separated. I was about five months pregnant with Noel when Bill and I got divorced.

[00:26:09.46]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. That's a good reason. [Laughs.]

[00:26:12.54]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah.

[00:26:14.70]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: I see. So this was really—okay, well, that places it, then. So this was the what, summer of—

[00:26:24.88]

JOAN BROWN: '61. What year—'60.

[00:26:27.26]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: '60.

[00:26:27.97]

JOAN BROWN: '60, yeah.

[00:26:31.03]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: And so how long were you in Europe?

[00:26:33.58]

JOAN BROWN: Three and a half months.

[00:26:37.36]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Uh-huh [affirmative]. And the main—other than the thrill of the special services in Rome—

[00:26:43.91]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah, I loved that.

[00:26:44.72]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Yeah, you can't resist—

[00:26:46.06]

JOAN BROWN: That's very important to me, right, yeah. No, and I think it shows in the paintings and things like this.

[00:26:51.26]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Yeah, yeah. But really, the hardcore artistic thrill was the Prado.

[00:26:57.44]

JOAN BROWN: That's one.

[00:26:58.21]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Yeah.

[00:26:58.72]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah, the Prado was it. And then we went to the Louvre. I saw a lot of stuff. I saw Tintorettos in Italy, and they knocked me out, but nothing like the Prado. And yeah, I bought Tintoretto books. And I like Tintoretto. I refer to him in classes. And I look at Tintoretto for myself, and stuff like this. And he has good dogs on checkerboard floors, too, and stuff, in his great big paintings. But no, nothing like the Prado.

[00:27:27.92]

We went to the Louvre, too, and I saw a lot of neat stuff that knocked me out. And there was a goofy Picasso Museum, which was in a house, which had a lot of those handmaidens that he had copied from Velázquez, which were really exciting and tremendously stimulating. But nothing knocked me out like the stuff in the Prado, until, until we ended up in London. That was the last part of our voyage. And then we came from London to San Francisco.

[00:27:57.50]

And at the National Gallery, there was a big Rembrandt show, which was an absolute knockout. And that did the same thing for me. It had all those self-portraits. It had drawings and etchings and paintings. It had some of the best art I'd ever seen in my life, and some of the worst, where Rembrandt never—where it just showed this guy never took a middle road. It was either all the way or nothing. He either fell flat on his ass, or he just excelled. And it had that whole slug of self-portraits where he had himself in just these far out and very straight getups, and just this tremendous exchange between himself and what he was portraying of himself on the canvas. And then that was another tremendous experience, too.

[00:28:46.38]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Yeah, that's the greatest series of self-portraits ever done, no question about it. Well, you were pregnant with Noel—

[00:28:55.17]

JOAN BROWN: Not too long after that. We got back that September. And I believe it was in—let's see, November, December, January, February, March, April, May, August. November, December of that year, I was pregnant with Noel—of '61.

[00:29:13.77]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Oh, let's see—

[00:29:21.02]

JOAN BROWN: So that takes us a year later.

[00:29:22.94]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Yeah. Was that your only trip to Europe? Or have you been—

[00:29:31.25]

JOAN BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:29:31.94]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Okay, so it was a one-shot thing. This is an obligatory art historical question. Do you think it had any strong influence, real impact on the direction of your

work?

[00:29:48.96]

JOAN BROWN: Sure, yeah. Yeah, something like—mentioned a second ago about the Rembrandt, that there was no middle of the road. He either fell on his ass or knocked himself out. But he never played it safe.

[00:30:07.27]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: So rather—but less in terms of a style, a master, so to speak, but more in terms of a—

[00:30:17.62]

JOAN BROWN: Basic, internal—

[00:30:18.75]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: —basic philosophy or something like—

[00:30:20.77]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah, interior attitudes of his, yeah.

[00:30:25.02]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Uh-huh [affirmative]. And a way to work, perhaps?

[00:30:28.84]

JOAN BROWN: Not a way to work in a physical, exterior sense—

[00:30:30.82]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Not mechanically.

[00:30:31.69]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah, not mechanically, but an internal kind of process, way to work, yes.

[Recorder stops; restarts.]

[00:30:43.38]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: End of July 1 interview with Joan Brown.

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[00:00:04.95]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. A second interview with Joan Brown on July 15, 1975. Okay, last time [Session 1, July 1 interview –Ed.] we ended up talking about your time in Europe, and the great times you had, the opera, *Aida* in Rome.

[00:00:29.28]

JOAN BROWN: Oh, yes. Being extravagant.

[00:00:31.80]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Being extravagant, staying with at Staempfli's place on the Coast of Brava. I think it's Cadaqués, isn't it?

[00:00:43.95]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah, Cadaqués.

[00:00:46.80]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Okay. And your reactions to the paintings in the Prado, and in the Louvre, and the National Gallery, especially the Rembrandt show. And we don't really have you back to San Francisco yet. But before we do transport you, I thought we might—several questions occur to me from our earlier discussion. And I thought we could just go down the list. We were discussing influences at one point. And one name that keeps coming up, I noticed also in Brenda Richardson's catalog, Francis Bacon. You invoke the name of Bacon quite frequently.

[00:01:34.99]

JOAN BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:01:35.35]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: You mentioned you saw a show with the Legion that was very influential.

[00:01:40.57]

JOAN BROWN: A group show.

[00:01:41.83]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: A group show with—

[00:01:43.12]

JOAN BROWN: He had one painting.

[00:01:44.02]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: With one painting in it. And what struck me, I asked you to try to describe what, specifically, it was that attracts you about Bacon's work. And you mentioned simplicity, hardness, and anger. And it made quite an interesting a group of qualities of adjectives. But most of all, and this is what you come back to in connection with the other artists you admire, is a sense of humanity, humanitarianism. Well, maybe not humanitarianism so much, but this understanding of humanity, a feeling for humanity. And you mentioned this so often in connection with different artists, and as a quality that you look for in art. It seems to me that this underlies your own—I don't want to say aesthetic. It's a personal philosophy, and that which you apparently carry to your own work. Is that accurately stated?

[00:02:52.06]

JOAN BROWN: Absolutely. Yes. The aesthetics are secondary, or what we think of or have been educated in art schools, or even what I teach—now I'm switching from "we" to "I." Even what I teach, I teach a lot in aesthetic terms. When it comes right down to my own work, it doesn't mean that much. But the humanity does.

[00:03:19.56]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, how do you feel, again, Bacon, trying to keep it focused in. What is it in Bacon's work that seems to convey so strongly the sense of humanity? Is it an expressionist view? Is it an emotional—let's put it this way—is it a heightened emotion?

[00:03:42.21]

JOAN BROWN: Yes. I feel his work is very emotional. And it's very out front. And although it is so strongly emotional, there still is an ability to stand back and view this situation for what it is. In other words, he's in control of the emotional situation. He can make order out of fantastically chaotic emotional responses. And I also feel that technically, that the way he describes his vocabulary, his language in terms of describing his image—

[00:04:30.81]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Formal language.

[00:04:31.11]

JOAN BROWN: —with big brushstrokes, little brushstrokes or what have you—his way of applying his paint to describe whatever imagery he's describing within that kind of language or description, he's also speaking about himself and about humanity in general.

[00:04:53.28]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: So you really do feel, then, that "formal" means technique, and the handling of the medium can convey an emotional—

[00:05:02.85]

JOAN BROWN: Absolutely. Absolutely.

[00:05:04.54]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: And does that idea come very much out of Abstract Expressionism?

[00:05:07.63]

JOAN BROWN: I'm sure it does. Yeah, I'm sure it does. But I must say, I've felt that way for a long, long time. And it comes very natural to me. It's not just a learned thing, because by now, after having been out of school for quite a while, stuff that doesn't mean anything goes by the boards. Other things replace it. But this is something I feel very, very definitely does. And for me, I can read or communicate into a painting by the way it's done. And I can spot no care, no connection with the materials, as being a rather cold, kind of put-off response to whatever it is you're presenting.

[00:05:49.15]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, do you view yourself—I know you don't like to be categorized, and that you are suspicious of this solution to dealing with—

[00:05:58.45]

JOAN BROWN: I'm naturally suspicious of anything. Everything.

[00:05:59.54]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Right. But would you view yourself as an expressionist?

[00:06:07.40]

JOAN BROWN: Yes.

[00:06:07.42]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: I think what you're saying—whether you view yourself that way or not, what you're saying is—

[00:06:11.01]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah. Absolutely. And I always will be. And it can take more obvious turns from time to time. It can be bolder or wilder visually. Other times it can be, say, smooth, smoother paint surface. But there's always a connection to the way I'm describing something, which is basically a expressionistic belief. So yeah, no matter whether I'm painting, looser or tighter or neater [laughs] or sloppier, it's still there, and always will be.

[00:06:39.21]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: And is your emotional state a determinant in the look of, say, the selection of imagery? Although imagery is something I'd like to go into more depth. But do you really feel there's a close connection between your own emotional state?

[00:06:54.84]

JOAN BROWN: Absolutely. And the way it's done, too. Yeah, absolutely. I feel most of my

work, if not all of it, maybe most, is like keeping a diary.

[00:07:10.92]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, that would explain a great deal about your imagery then, as well. You say that you're not interested in formalist theory concerns—

[00:07:25.45]

JOAN BROWN: Mm-mm [negative].

[00:07:29.18]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: —and you're not attracted to purely intellectual art, whatever that means.

[00:07:35.18]

JOAN BROWN: No. I don't put it—yeah, whatever the hell it means. I don't put it down, either, because all the years I've been teaching, of course, in graduate seminars, you run into this kind of thing a little more than you would in undergraduate classes. And it's something you learn to cope with and be open to— "Cope with it," [laughs] shows you how interested I am. You know, be open to. And that's your job, too. You have to deal with this kind of situation, too or you have no business being there.

[00:08:02.03]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: But for you—

[00:08:02.15]

JOAN BROWN: And to be sympathetic and responsive to it. And intellectually, I can be. And I can understand it and respect the person who does it. And I do like the fact that people make things, and even if it's things I don't like or respond to. Boy, I hand it to people caring about something, whatever it is, and doing the best they can with it. But emotionally, when it comes right down to it, it no more interests me than flying to the moon does, just absolutely no interest in it.

[00:08:34.80]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: But by the same token, you mentioned that you admire Albers. Now, can you tell me what it is?

[00:08:42.16]

JOAN BROWN: Yes. Yes. His work evokes emotion to me. Maybe this was, let's see, ten years ago. God, I judge everything by how old my son is. Let's see, now he's thirteen. Yeah, that's ten. I hit it on the nose—or he'll be thirteen next month. About ten years ago, I was at a party given by fairly wealthy people. And they had these small Albers watercolors, the "Homage to the Square." And they must have had about ten or twelve of them, very subtle, very small, understated things, totally the opposite of what I was involved in or usually am involved in.

[00:09:26.94]

And these things evoked a strong emotional response to me in terms of feeling, just with the color. They went past idea. I felt the man really was conveying that these squares, the colors, again, were a vehicle for him to express things that he felt—not only thought, but felt very deeply. And that's what I picked up from these particular things.

[00:09:51.61]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: So you seem to respond less to the intellectual content—

[00:09:58.18]

JOAN BROWN: Oh, yes.

[00:09:58.29]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: —to a system, to dealing with color problems and relationships.

[00:10:00.87]

JOAN BROWN: It bores me, frankly. That's why I don't.

[00:10:03.82]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: But for one reason or another, what came across to you, what comes across to you in Albers, is really an emotional content and the use of color.

[00:10:14.89]

JOAN BROWN: Right. Yeah, but I do want to say something just a bit further. And I think very often, maybe it's because of the area, this whole damn attitude towards this area perpetuated by the artist who gets on my nerves, frequently, or has more so over the years of, "boy, aren't we a bunch of dummies?" You know, we're just a bunch of funky people expressing ourselves that are anti-intellectual. We can't write anything. We can't speak properly. We can't do this. We can't do that. We just go around looking stupid, wearing cowboy outfits or something.

Nothing personal by that. I'm not implying that to anybody. And I've been tagged with this because I've made it clear from the beginning in terms of what I paint and what I've said, too, that I am disinterested in the heavy intellectual approach towards art. Yet, what I would like to say is that I understand it. And I couldn't—I'm defending myself—

[00:11:16.56]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: That's fine.

[00:11:16.95]

JOAN BROWN: —because I've been represented this, way and told this. And it makes me damn angry, especially as I've gotten older. But I have been teaching since 1960. What is that, fifteen years? I'll be teaching the rest of my life, I assume, until I can retire. And you don't teach that long and care about what you're doing and make contact with other people without knowing something more than what you choose yourself to do.

[00:11:48.82]

And so what I do and what I respond to is by choice, not because I'm not either able to, or too silly, or dumb, or what have you, to do so. And I see the difference. I know the difference. But I've got my personal choices. But yet, I can deal with it with other people—and very well, I would say, patting myself on the back. Okay?

[00:12:12.69]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Fine. So you really aren't—you don't feel yourself involved with the so-called crucial issues of painting. I'm not saying that these are—

[00:12:26.89]

JOAN BROWN: No, I'm not.

[00:12:27.97]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: And what I'm talking about, of course, Greenbergian formalism, and—

[00:12:32.03]

JOAN BROWN: Right. I know exactly what you mean.

[00:12:33.20]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: —what's pointed out in Stella, and people.

[00:12:36.56]

JOAN BROWN: I'm involved less at this point in my life than I may have ever been. Yes. No, that doesn't interest me. I have my own criteria or a set of values or what have you. And very often I want things a certain way. But I don't know what they are until I see them, and until I'm able to dig them out and pull them out. And this is makes for excitement for me. Other people I know get very excited, turned on, by really stalking the problem in a very complex, highly intellectual way with a lot of research, a lot of old sketches—I hate that word, sketches—a lot of planning done on paper, say, beforehand, whether it's for a sculpture painting.

[00:13:22.41]

They really get turned on, and they can do the whole thing on a small scale and then still retain the interest and excitement of therefore blowing it up and getting it on canvas or into a piece of sculpture on a large scale. And they retain that. I would just be bored silly, just bored to death. That's my nature. That's the way I am.

[00:13:41.61]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: So you're not the type of artist who would concern herself with Cubism and the heritage of Cubism?

[00:13:54.72]

JOAN BROWN: Oh, God, no. Yes, it'd just bore me stiff. But again, if somebody else wants to do it, you know, hooray for them.

[00:14:00.90]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Figure-ground relationships and things like this in themselves are not particularly interesting. Well, there's no point in belaboring it. I sort of could anticipate the answers. But I thought for the record, it is something to clear up—

[00:14:15.57]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah. But I just—

[00:14:15.72]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: —but I might as well mention, as we discussed earlier, in light of the catalog that was done for your show at Berkeley. It was perhaps a little misleading in this connection on this very issue.

[00:14:28.36]

JOAN BROWN: Right. Well, that's why I tended to belabor it. And we'll say once more, it's not because I feel it's invalid or that I don't understand it. It's just that I'm not interested for myself.

[00:14:41.80]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Fine. Again, getting back to your list, this note that you keep striking of humanity in art. It interests me that—it seems basic. I think it's obvious, it's basic to your point of view and your work. And you see it in animals.

[00:15:01.14]

JOAN BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:15:01.35]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Is this a sort of anthropomorphic thing? Is it that you see human characteristics in animals? Certainly dogs, you admire the dogs of Velázquez, and dogs appear in your own work. How can you enlighten me on that?

[00:15:17.90]

JOAN BROWN: Yes. Well, sure, I see human characteristics in animals. But maybe more to the point, is that I see the animal characteristics in people. And very often, the roles are reversed. Maybe I mentioned this in the tape a few weeks ago. But there's a painting sitting right in the living room across from me where the person involved doing all that drinking is being the fool, or giving in to his—maybe I shouldn't say weaker nature. What the hell? That's the wrong thing to say—

[00:15:56.24]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Careful. [Laughs.]

[00:15:56.42]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah, right. [Laughs.] While I'm sitting here with my coffee and [inaudible]. And the dog—very often I will do the dogs as spectators. The dog knows something that guy doesn't know. He's very aware of what's going on. But yet, nevertheless, his head is someplace else, too. And he's the more mystical being of the two involved there. And studying and watching—having had animals for a good period of time, I find this very, very often about them and in some of the paintings done by the people I respond to so strongly.

Here's this little Velázquez book on the table. There's the animal, and there's the person. And they're connected. They're together because they're in the same situation and they're next to each other and stuff. But he's somewhere else and he's totally somewhere else, the dog is. His head is off somewhere and the guy is off somewhere. But the dog is usually much further away than the person is. And this kind of duality, this exchange of the animal nature in the person and the human nature in the—or connection or psychic response that the animal picks up from the person—is something that continues to fascinate me. I see it more in dogs than I do in cats.

[00:17:26.66]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Does this at all tie in with the Christian duality of the animal spirit and the—well, let's see. Basically, the rational, the spiritual, and the animal, the duality within human beings.

[00:17:48.00]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah, I'd say it is, unconsciously. But it's never something I thought out.

[00:17:53.06]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Because it certainly participates in a time-honored tradition.

[00:17:57.27]

JOAN BROWN: It sure does.

[00:17:58.04]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: This is one of the basic, for instance, themes in Shakespeare.

[00:18:01.13]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah. Oh, I feel my work's very, very traditional, extremely so. And also, too, I'm sure this accounts for, from time to time, we're all have the animal head on the human where they'll be combined in one, or the human head on the animal.

[00:18:25.37]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: I'm bouncing around a little bit here.

[00:18:26.90]

JOAN BROWN: That's okay.

[00:18:28.88]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Another contemporary painter you mentioned, among those few whom

you really admire is de Kooning. And I was wondering if you could, again, expand on that a little bit.

[00:18:44.60]

JOAN BROWN: Sure. Yeah.

[00:18:44.87]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: What is it about de Kooning?

[00:18:46.58]

JOAN BROWN: In the beginning, it was two things. It was being I was so interested in slopping paint around, abstract. I don't see it as slopping around. But that's an easy term to give it. But I loved his surfaces. Jeez, it's beautiful. And the combination of line. I liked a lot of technical things. I liked the way he described things and fought with the surface, and all this kind of thing. As the years have gone by—this goes back to when I first saw reproductions of de Kooning's, which was in the late '50s. And boy, he was a hero to me. And I loved the way he handles his surfaces. That's the late '50s, and '75 now.

Gradually, as time has gone by, I've been very much less interested in his surfaces. I can still find them sensual, sexual, exciting, but not with the same enthusiasm that I did years ago. But what stands out, what I like as much, or perhaps more so, was the earlier paintings which I connected strongly to of the "Woman" series—a woman on a bicycle, the "Woman" series.

And I think this gets back to what we were talking about earlier, about there's a marvelous humanness in those. It's a whole complex bunch of emotions that I get from them. They're angry. The same thing I would say about Bacon. They're angry. On one hand, they're put-downs. And yet, they're terribly sympathetic to the image that he's dealing with. There's just this vast array of dimensions within the emotions that he put into those. And I find them very humane.

[00:20:33.44]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Do you feel that the figure is necessary to capturing this type of humanity?

[00:20:40.29]

JOAN BROWN: No, I don't. That's why I wouldn't have responded to the Albers in such. Because they evoked feelings, real feelings to me, evoked the feeling of what it's like on a very foggy, cold day. This is corny. It's the kind of saying the guy on the street would say about responding to paintings. But again, as time has gone by, I think a lot of those guys on the street have a better concept of what's going—

[00:21:05.10]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: They're closer to it than the theoreticians.

[00:21:05.45]

JOAN BROWN: That's right. —than all us so-called professionals, whether artists or historians or what have you, critics. And these squares evoked different feelings. I've had feelings of rainy, cold days, foggy days. So the calmness, one can feel out on the Bay, things like that. And I do not feel that the figure is necessary. Again, we find our own language in terms of imagery, as well as our own way of describing them. And this can change as time goes by.

But the imagery is only a vehicle for us. It's a vehicle to get across many other things. So I may choose the dogs and the people. My husband may choose the still life and hunks of cheese and things that he describes. But we're talking about the same things. Albers may use the square. Albers would probably hate me if he heard me say any of these [laughs], but that's tough.

[00:22:03.83]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: That's tough because we're not interviewing Albers.

[00:22:06.08]

JOAN BROWN: That's right.

[00:22:06.20]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: We're interviewing Joan Brown. You also mentioned an early enthusiasm for Egyptian art.

[00:22:15.29]

JOAN BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:22:16.58]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: And it was very interesting to me that you mentioned, in some of your recent work, you're drawing more and more upon Egyptian art. What is it about—What is it in Egyptian art that appeals? Is it this stylization? Is it the hieratic treatment?

[00:22:35.97]

JOAN BROWN: Simplicity. Yeah, I don't—no, it's not the hieratic treatment. I don't see Egyptian art as that stylized, though some of the carvings on the walls and things like that, with all the feet facing forward— And we tend to see more of that in history books and what have you, than of that marvelous period, which I think produced some of the most humane, touching, art of all times. And that was that period where—short period of time—where that guy reigned, Akhenaten—

[00:23:10.67]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Akhenaten.

[00:23:11.49]

JOAN BROWN: Akhenaten, yeah. I can never pronounce that guy's name right. And I've been crazy about him for years. And that particular period, as a child, it fascinated me in terms of history or what went on. Again, it was a humaneness which I was not aware of, which came across to me. I read everything I could get my hands on that particular period. Nefertiti, of course, was his wife. But then, of course, as I've gotten older and look a little bit into, the history—

[00:23:36.12]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: He was the monotheist, one God.

[00:23:38.52]

JOAN BROWN: That's right. And tremendously humane guy. He's made out to be a rat in a lot of books. There's one I can't read right now, the guy who found King Tut's tomb, somebody gave me. And all he does is keep slamming this guy, and I can't get through that book because it really bugs me the hell out of me.

[00:23:56.65]

But within that period of time, that short reign, it was like 1347. It was only about thirty years, maybe less than that. But it was 1300 BC is when this took place. The art was dramatically different than what we are familiarized with, as I'm repeating myself, in history books. And there was the utmost kind of simplicity. But yet, my God, it would catch people in certain gestures.

[00:24:29.07]

What were described were very common, everyday things that we all witness and experience and feel, which somehow I—for me, are some of the most moving—maybe two people talking, the husband and the wife talking, playing. Maybe the man and the woman—

here's the King and the Queen. They usually represented them playing, offering each other a cup of what, wine, whatever the hell it was. Or the woman, Nefertiti, just being caught for a second, watching her children playing off in the courtyard. Marvelous descriptiveness of animals, of cats and dogs, and just an everyday kind of family life and situation.

[00:25:11.95]

It was very beautiful. They employed the head sculptor, a guy named Beck [ph], whose name I only remember because that was the name of my great grandfather, same name. And he was the guy who oversaw all this, the art at that time—I guess the sculpture mainly. And it was a marvelous kind of period. The other stuff tends to be a little more stylized. But I still like it. Again, I like the simplicity. I like the way they get right down to whatever it is they're describing—lips, eyebrows. There's no screwing around. And they, too, may see it as kind of mask-like or glamorous or far out, or what have you.

[00:25:50.65]

But this—it was a description, again, of what people did. Men and women would get up in the morning and go put on all that black eyeliner. And that's what they did in the sculpture. They're just like painting all those masks, just like the same thing they did to their face. And it's a marvelous directness and simplicity.

[00:26:08.95]

And yet, each one of those heads—and either I've seen the good stuff, what I've seen in actuality or in reproductions—each one is different, and really conveys a sense of a presence of an entirely different person. And yet it's done so simply. And it's fascinating to me. And tremendous concern for form, anti-stylization. The noses just weren't as blocked, the same nose on every person, is marvelous touch—the most delicate bridge on the nose, or very wide, flat nose, and concern for distinguishing the shape of an upper lip from a lower lip. They really captured form in the simplest kind of way. And each one had a very unique thing about it, as each person does.

[00:26:59.54]

And I'd say some of this has influenced me in the fact of really enjoying, for a while, working with silhouettes, although that was twofold and more dimensional because it was a transition period to of trying to do a portrait, and get the feeling of a particular person just with a silhouette. I don't know if any of that makes all that much sense. I could go on forever. But if that covers it.

[00:27:30.58]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Yeah, I think it does. I think it does. Yeah, I think that's fine.

[00:27:33.28]

JOAN BROWN: And witty. They were very, very, very witty—the Egyptians were—which I get a kick out of some of the Chinese artists. But I think they were the wittiest of any race. And I like the wit, not sarcastic kind of humor, just wit about people, about being able to laugh at yourself, about everyday occurrences. For instance, shall I give a couple of examples of what I mean by the wit?

[00:27:58.60]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Sure, mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:27:59.02]

JOAN BROWN: Okay, one of them is a beautiful carved monkey which they use to put the skeleton of the monkey, and then they would wrap up—they wrapped up a lot of their animals and things. But here they have this beautiful carved monkey where the tail and the butt come out and they slip this thing in. And this is a very witty kind of idea, which they use constantly. They got a kick out of this.

Also, too, they wrapped up—they were very sneaky and shifty, and fairly upfront about being sneaky and shifty. Many of the mummies—because I've seen the X-rays at Field Museum in

Chicago—many of the mummies, these guys would—and for royalty, too, would really screw around in and make it a lot easier. They'd be, in other words, they'd slip in a bone of a horse for the leg instead of the person. They figured, oh, what the hell, this is boring, use this instead. It's quicker. Let's go. And so many of these things, through the X-rays, showed more of an insight into how their minds work, which is exactly how ours work, completely.

[00:29:09.77]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Mm. Take the shortcut.

[00:29:11.18]

JOAN BROWN: Take the shortcut. And a lot of the animals that were insects or reptiles—[Telephone rings.]

[Recorder stops; restarts.]

[00:29:20.76]

[In progress]—kept talking about the wit and the insights into these peoples' minds, and others of these—these mummies, say your pet cat, or your pet rat, or your pet beetle dies, or whatever. You go to have it embalmed and mummified. Well, very often there'd be nothing in there. You'd bring this beloved, my dog Rufus, in there, this pet dog. And you say, I want this mummified, do all this fancy job. And then take X-rays. There's nothing in there. They ditched the dogs and stuff. So I get a kick out of that. That's my wit. That's not theirs. But anyway, another witty example of the Egyptians, very much in touch with real life—got a big kick out of—they mummified some guy who apparently was—this was written up in the *Smithsonian* about a year ago, which I think is a marvelous magazine, by the way.

[00:30:18.12]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Good.

[00:30:18.36]

JOAN BROWN: They did some excavations on these mummies. And jeez, some of them were fantastically preserved. But one was, I got a big kick out of, because it was of this guy who lived, I think, to a ripe old age and was quite a stud, or a very virile—he cut quite a wide path during his lifetime. So when it came time to embalm him, they set him up where he had an erection. Did you see that? Did you read that?

[00:30:47.74]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: No. [Laughs.]

[00:30:47.98]

JOAN BROWN: And that's the way they mummified him. And so now when they found him a couple of years ago, after 3,000 years or whatever, there he was. And that's how—

[00:30:58.63]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: He really stood out among all the other mummies.

[00:31:02.35]

JOAN BROWN: Yes. [Laughs.] And there's just this warmth that I get from their things.

[00:31:07.16]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: That's interesting, because that's not probably what many others would see in Egyptian art.

[00:31:13.96]

JOAN BROWN: Not at all.

[00:31:14.23]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: All right. So that certainly makes it a little more clear what appeals to you. Another thing that you come back to, talking about old master paintings that you admire, you, of course, talk about Velázquez. And then you mentioned saying—admiring some Tintorettos. And in both cases, you mentioned dogs on checkerboard squares. Well, of course that appears again in your work.

[00:31:50.14]

JOAN BROWN: Constantly. Right.

[00:31:50.50]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: What is it about dogs on checkerboard squares?

[00:31:53.32]

JOAN BROWN: Well, I've asked myself, what the hell interests do I have in checkerboard squares? I've always liked checks. Even as a child, any item of clothing that was, say, checked or dotted, or checked, mainly. Especially black and white knocks me out—I would really respond to. And in the early years when I was painting, I used checks a lot. I didn't use them neatly like I do now. Now I try and make them the same size. I try. [Laughs.] Things like that.

But nevertheless, there was still the interest, and I did them. And I think there is some kind of satisfaction from imposing order in a chaotic situation that has to do with checks. There's something methodical. There's something orderly that goes on within that I'm very strongly moved by. It's much deeper than that. I can't go any further into it because I don't know; it's on a different level. But it does have to do with order. I feel comforted, organized. I feel calmed by large, checkered situations.

[00:33:04.49]

If I had money, or if I had enough money, I would put black and white checks over most all of this house on the floor. And I've seen it in movies. And maybe this is, too, why I like them on another more superficial level. Many of the old movies, which I spent so much time at watching when I was a kid, movies from the '40s, many of those rich people like Edward Arnold's house. He was always a rich guy with a bunch of teenage daughters, rich brats.

[00:33:35.86]

Very often the foyer and different areas in the house would have these nice black and white marble—at least they look black and white in the movie, in the black and white movies—floors. And it's just something I have a strong response to. If I were to analyze this—and I hate doing this kind of thing, because I don't like it when other people do, especially like psychiatrists, psychologists, art historians.

[00:34:00.67]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: But at least you're doing it to yourself.

[00:34:01.52]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah, I know. And it probably doesn't mean a damn. This is probably just all mixed up and not so at all. But why not? Sometimes it's fun to screw around with what you think may be going on. And it could be the animal, which, you know, I mean, animals are wild. They might be domesticated. But then they might have human characteristics more so than humans sometimes. But nevertheless, there's a sense of unpredictability of wildness, about even a pet poodle or chihuahua—

[00:34:32.36]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Especially. [Laughs.]

[00:34:33.32]

JOAN BROWN: [Laughs.] Yes, especially. Well, my dog is utterly unpredictable. And there's a sense of unpredictability and kind of tension, let's say tension, anxiety, which we all feel

around animals to one degree or another, even a bird or a bunch of fish in a fish tank. There's a deep sense of tension involving the animal. And yet, the checkerboard is, as I said, such a trusting, kind of placid, orderly situation. And maybe it's the duality, the paradox between the two that turns me on. Maybe, just maybe.

[00:35:18.11]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: You seem very—[coughs] excuse me—very concerned with imposing order.

[00:35:23.96]

JOAN BROWN: Very!

[00:35:24.47]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Which is interesting. It almost is paradoxical. [Joan laughs.] And I wonder if it isn't possible that since your art is, by your own admission, very much emotionally charged, very much—

[00:35:41.79]

JOAN BROWN: Well, the wanting orders isn't emotionally charged as wanting the tension and anxiety. I am compulsive that way for order. I do not have an orderly mind at all. And I'm constantly finding ways to make myself feel better by imposing order.

[00:36:01.79]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: I think that's, in itself, is extremely revealing.

[00:36:06.11]

JOAN BROWN: Constantly. I mean, look at this house, for instance. Sure, I have a cleaning lady. She does the heavy work. I don't want to do it and I'm lousy at.

[00:36:13.06]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: But you place things.

[00:36:14.60]

JOAN BROWN: Oh, and I keep things in order. The newspapers are put away every day. The sink—there's never any dirty dishes around. I wasn't always like this. But it's become more necessary as I've realized how disorderly my mind is. And I think I'm afraid of things just all getting chaotic and going to hell.

[00:36:33.99]

And I was thinking about this morning, walking into the studio early after everyone left. Noel was off to school. Gordon went off to drawing. And I like these times alone very much, to go in there, silent, quiet. And what a mess. You know, there's all this rotten old paint cans around and the brushes. And then it's fascinating and challenging to take, to gather up these tools and this mess, in this situation and try and create some order in it. It might not be my kind of—I mean, it's my kind of order. It might not be somebody else's. They might think that the paintings are a big mess all the time. But to me, they're orderly. I have some control.

[00:37:23.18]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: To pick up the chronology, then, some time ago, we had you in Europe. And I think we pretty well finished with the experience there, at least that part that's going to go on the tape. And we had you to London. Then I assume you came back from London to San Francisco.

[00:37:51.38]

JOAN BROWN: San Francisco. Right.

[00:37:51.71]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Is there anything more that you feel you'd like to tell about the European experience, any aspect whatsoever? Or do you think we pretty well—

[00:38:02.57]

JOAN BROWN: I think it pretty well got covered there.

[00:38:05.72]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, okay. What about the—

[00:38:07.49]

JOAN BROWN: Why? Did you have some questions?

[00:38:08.88]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: No, not really. I just wanted to give you a last chance, or give us a last chance. So then did you sail back?

[00:38:17.58]

JOAN BROWN: No, we flew back from London.

[00:38:24.93]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: It was with Manuel?

[00:38:25.92]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah, right. I think I mentioned that I loved London very, very much, and could have really stayed there. It's the only place I've been outside of San Francisco I could have. Maybe I mentioned this, maybe I didn't. But yeah, that was a long flight back. Jeez, I remember drinking most of the way on that plane.

[00:38:47.82]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, that usually helps. Was that your only trip to Europe?

[00:38:53.17]

JOAN BROWN: Yes.

[00:38:53.40]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: You haven't been back since.

[00:38:54.52]

JOAN BROWN: No.

[00:38:54.60]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: So that was, as they say, your European experience.

[00:38:57.34]

JOAN BROWN: Right.

[00:38:58.59]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Okay. Well, then you returned to San Francisco in, what, '61?

[00:39:04.80]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah, well, I got mixed up that last session with the tapes. And I can't—let's see now. Did I come back and go to graduate school, or had I been out? I think it was—It must have been '60—It was '61. Now, the catalog gets things wrong, too. Because don't forget, I gave Brenda this information. I'm capable of screwing up.

[00:39:34.40]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: But according to the catalog, you were married to Manuel in 1962.

[00:39:39.59]

JOAN BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. So it was '61.

[00:39:40.84]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Okay. So that, we have the time frame, then, is 1961. And you just returned from your trip to Europe.

[00:39:49.76]

JOAN BROWN: Right. Because that fall, I believe I got pregnant. Because Noel was born in August. I must have been pregnant in November. I think. If that's calculating right.

[00:40:06.65]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, what about, I think now's as good a time as any to talk about your recollections of the San Francisco Bay Area in the '50s, going back a little bit. But then in the early '60s, how you found the relationships with other artists, your involvement, or lack of involvement with the North Beach scene. After all, this was still part of the Beat period.

[00:40:40.78]

JOAN BROWN: This was hot stuff. Right, definitely.

[00:40:44.21]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, how do you recall those days? What was it like?

[00:40:48.98]

JOAN BROWN: It was really exciting, highly charged energy-wise, lots of psychic energy, whatever fancy terms you want to give it, or I want to give it, were going on. It was a very charged kind of period of time. And I believe most of us who were involved working—all of us involved working, were at a high peak in terms of energy and feeling this charge-ness. And we charged each other up constantly. And that is not just the artists, the people I'm thinking of at the old California School of Fine Arts, but North Beach in general. You felt this with the poets. Of course, lots of times we didn't like the poets.

And I say "we" because that's how it was. It was a "we." After that, it's been an "I" ever since. But anybody who's really being straight or honest about it from that time really should say "we," because that's how it went. And that's very different from these times, or from how we've all outgrown this, of course, and times have changed. But it was a big "we." And the poets were a "we." And the musicians were a "we."

[00:41:58.35]

And sometimes we'd all meet and just be one big bunch of energies all coming together. But yeah, the poets were very, very active. And the painters and the poets and the musicians all exchanged. We did. Whether we reluctantly admit that or not, we gave each other a great deal at that time. Everybody was excited. It was kind of like a big burst of energy, a rebirth in a sense, for a short period of time.

[00:42:35.62]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: And you were conscious of this at the time, or is it in retrospect that you can say that?

[00:42:39.96]

JOAN BROWN: Both. I was slightly conscious at the time. I wouldn't have been anywhere else. If I'd had a million dollars and was offered to spend three years in Italy or something, I

wouldn't have taken it. So in that sense I was conscious. I would visit L.A. later on in the late '50s. Early '60s, I'd go to New York. There was flashes in the beginning—I'm sure I said this on the tape—of probably wanting to stay. But I knew better than that. I wasn't returning here because my family was here. As I pointed out in the tapes, I don't have all that much connection or roots in that sense. It was a highly charged area here. And I knew it in my own way.

[00:43:26.95]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Did you feel—was there a feeling among this group, you and your friends and colleagues—

[00:43:34.89]

JOAN BROWN: Buddies. [Laughs.]

[00:43:35.28]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: —buddies, that you really were—something important was happening? You were doing something?

[00:43:39.78]

JOAN BROWN: Not in any—oh, gee. I'm sorry. Not in any long, long-term way, like in terms of posterity that this is important. It was important for that day, or for that week, or for that moment, is more like it. That's how it was important. And it was something that was not to be let go or thrown away. But it had nothing to do with, "we're making history," or posterity. This would never have entered any of our minds, at least not the people I hung out with, that's for sure. Although some of these same people have certainly capitalized on it, and never gotten out of the damn era, which is too bad. But jeez, it was exciting. It was just—

[00:44:24.97]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: You felt you were different. You were special, and you were in an exciting place.

[00:44:28.89]

JOAN BROWN: Yes. Yeah, right.

[00:44:30.69]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Who were your friends? You were living with Manuel? Not yet on Fillmore Street, I guess.

[00:44:37.34]

JOAN BROWN: No. Now, Bill Brown and I moved to Fillmore Street.

[00:44:41.28]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Oh, okay. I see.

[00:44:41.39]

JOAN BROWN: Bill Brown and I lived, for a couple of years, three blocks from the Institute. I think I mentioned this, in a marvelous garden apartment for 45 [dollars] a month with jasmine and a big white rabbit.

[00:44:52.31]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Right, right.

[00:44:52.85]

JOAN BROWN: And then Bill and I moved to be—we got very, very tight with Wally Hedrick and Jay DeFeo, really tight. And we belonged to the Six Gallery. And we showed there—jeez, I had a show there in 1956.

[00:45:07.68]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: That was your first one-person show, right?

[00:45:09.94]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah. No, it was two-man—I don't say "two-person." "Two-man;" I'm old fashioned. I'm too old for that stuff. But, with a guy named Mike Nathan, who's dead now. He wiped himself out on drugs. Drugs were around. They, of course, weren't as heavy or as popular as they are now. But the drug marijuana was a big part of the scene, mostly with the musicians and the poets—and peyote, but anyway—which I never got involved in. I don't like any drug but alcohol, frankly.

[00:45:48.53]

But anyway, my friends—we got very tight with Wally and Jay, met them through the Six Gallery. I'm saying Bill and I. We also got very tight with a group of people that came from Arts and Crafts to work with Elmer. And that was Manuel Neri, and Bob Downes, and a guy named Hank Perrier [ph]. And then there were, of course, our teachers who, on one hand, we were quite friendly with, more so than maybe students are now. But it wasn't super intimate. And that was Elmer Bischoff, Nate Olivera, Frank Lobdell. We would socialize with them. And they were all part of giving out this energy, and receiving the energy, too, that I was talking about. And let's see. Other students at school whose names I don't remember because, you know, they come and go. But then Bill—

[00:46:46.85]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: It was really a group of artists.

[00:46:47.87]

JOAN BROWN: It was a group of artists in the beginning. And then Bill and I, of course, met Wally and Jay. And before, I guess before we lived there, before we moved to Fillmore Street, we got friendly—we used to go to the Old Cellar, and we made friends with musicians who were about our age and as excited as we were, and some starting out and very enthusiastic. And we clicked somehow. And we used to show there once a month. We'd bring paintings down there, walk them down the street, from school to Union Street, get stared at, these great big, stupid, sloppy paintings and carry this sculpture down, Bill and Manuel and myself and Bob Downes and things.

[00:47:34.02]

I don't think Wally ever showed with us down there. We were all students at school. And we changed the show once a month. And we'd have a big opening, and all the poets would come, and musicians, and play and all that jazz and poetry. And sometimes Elmer would come, and Diebenkorn, and all that gang. They got a big kick out of us because we were energetic. And we all worked our asses off. We really worked hard. Very important, I feel, in the beginning, especially. And we really supported each other. Of course, we got in fights, and stuff. I guess we were pretty snotty and cliquey, too.

And then when we moved to Fillmore Street, Bill and I, then we got very friendly with the poets. That's when I met Bruce Conner. Wally Berman brought Bruce Conner by. This would be '58? '58 I met Bruce. See, Michael McClure and his wife Joanne, were living upstairs with Wally and Jay. We were next door. Who the hell was above us? Later on, Jim Newman. But somebody—jeez, I don't know. Ed Moses was there for a while. Yeah, I guess there was a transition of people above us. And so then we got tight with McClure. And I'm smiling because I had a romantic, very short, romantic escapade with Mike then. He's writing all these poems to me.

[00:49:05.81]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Another claim to fame. Was he?

[00:49:07.20]

JOAN BROWN: Yes.

[00:49:09.46]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Any of them published?

[00:49:11.41]

JOAN BROWN: Not that I know of. I don't know. But he liked my painting. He thought I was really swell painter. And I really didn't like his poetry that much. This was a very short interlude. I probably shouldn't say this, but I did. So what? But anyway, let's see then. Who else? What other poets did we meet at the time? Oh, Philip Lamantia—all of them, Robert Duncan, the whole works.

[00:49:40.28]

And we were also tight with another group who were a combination, going into film, and poets. And that was Larry Jordan, and a terrible person named Kirby Doyle, dreadful person. He has one of my paintings and he won't give it back. And that was both from the McClure/Wally Berman crowd, that we knew these. And also because Larry Jordan's wife, Patty Jordan, was a model. And she was our favorite model. And we would use her. So everybody was all kind of intermingled like that. And oh, George Herms, of course, we knew him real well at the time.

[00:50:23.29]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: That must have been a very special time, because many of these people are gone and doing other things.

[00:50:28.96]

JOAN BROWN: That's right.

[00:50:29.37]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: But it all came together.

[00:50:30.75]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah, and everybody was on—that I'm talking about, whose names I can remember, were on a high energy level. It's not like there were a few, and then the rest were kind of hanging off or riding on the coattails of the excess energy that these people were generating. Everybody was up there. Everybody was on that. And after a point, it really got too damn hard to handle.

[00:50:53.91]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Why was that?

[00:50:54.17]

JOAN BROWN: It was out of control, and it was interfering. There were too damn many parties. There was—although I was younger and I was strong, physically, and could withstand a lot more than—both physically and mental, psychically or psychologically than I can now. I'm much more impatient than I was at that time. But even then, I had a very private, kind of introverted side to me, which of course, I had developed strongly as a child and have nurtured over the years and protected. And after a point, that started to get a little bit invaded upon. And although I didn't—I couldn't put it in the words that I'm saying now. But I could put it in simple terms, like I got sick of people coming over. And I got sick of a party every time I turned around. And I got sick of drinking so damn much gin, which of course, is my own fault and responsibility. Nevertheless, I—

[00:51:53.97]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: It rots your brain.

[00:51:54.78]

JOAN BROWN: Yes. This worked up—No, it made me crazy. I didn't need that wild, and

wilder, and crazier. And there was just a party every time we turned around. And we had a door between the two houses, Wally and Jay, and myself and Bill. I probably mentioned this on the last tape too, but you can fix that up. And so there was just coming and going constantly. And it got incestuous. And I just got damn fed up with it and bugged. And I realized now it was cutting into my privacy, which I very much need and all that. So I got the hell out of there.

[00:52:34.49]

I left. Bill and I split up, which was really my doing. I wanted to get out of there and I wanted to go on my own hook. And so I moved out. Bill remained. And to some degree, the parties and the social life went on. But shortly after that it started dying out. People went their own ways. I think Wally went back down to Mexico. And at some point Joanne and Mike moved out. And so things dispersed, as they well should have. The musicians all, I don't think any of them are even still around. I think most of them got hooked on hard drugs and all got wasted somewhere.

[00:53:13.55]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: That's right. There's a tremendous mortality for that.

[00:53:17.72]

JOAN BROWN: Tremendous, yes. And I can see why. This high peak of energy, I'm sure, for my own survival, I had to get the hell out of there. Which I damn well did, although I didn't shape up much. But at least I was involved in less of that and more of other crazy things.

[00:53:40.13]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: What were—excuse me.

[00:53:40.55]

JOAN BROWN: No, go ahead.

[00:53:41.89]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: A couple of things that come out of this. I'm interested in your evaluation of this particular situation, I guess centered on the Fillmore residence, the incestuousness, and a group of people really too tight. It sounds almost like an extended family, a communal situation, although I'm sure the term wouldn't have been used then.

[00:54:12.31]

JOAN BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Right.

[00:54:12.70]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: But you feel that ultimately it was—or at least potentially a damaging thing.

[00:54:20.39]

JOAN BROWN: Potentially.

[00:54:21.06]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Can you expand on that? Was it a matter of relationships, exhaustion, what's—how could you—

[00:54:27.54]

JOAN BROWN: Yes, exhaustion. That kind of high energy level, when you have a whole bunch of people and you're constantly butting up against each other on an almost 24 hour a day basis, and everybody is keyed up and wild and crazy. Jesus, there's bound to be explosions, or fizzling out, or anger or misunderstandings, craziness, what have you. It is a family type situation. Say you're involved with someone, you're married, or you're living with

somebody. And my God, you're together 24 hours a day. And you're doing exactly the same things at the same time. You're just present, you're right there. Things are bound to get kind of crazy.

[00:55:08.40]

And so there was that, plus this particular crazy energy coming from this area at that particular time, had everybody so damn high keyed up, so keyed up and involving themselves in excessive behavior, whether it was getting three hours of sleep every night or drinking yourself stupid every night, or in other, say, maybe musicians and some of the poets' cases, of just drugging yourself with chemicals or what have you, to death—to death, literally, for some of them. You can't keep up. So either you get wiped out or you go away.

[00:55:47.43]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: How would you say that—

[00:55:49.35]

JOAN BROWN: I don't know if I'm answering that clearly. You'll have to ask me questions—

[00:55:51.63]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: No, no, I think the point is made. I'm curious to know how you would recall work was affected. In other words, we're talking about a group of artists, productive people, and indulging themselves, basically.

[00:56:11.67]

JOAN BROWN: The work went very, very well. Oh, I can't say these were great things that were being done, whether it was my paintings or Manuel's sculptures, or Jay's paintings, or Wally's paintings. But in terms of output, a tremendous amount of work was being done. And people did kick off from each other. This is, I say again—I keep repeating myself—this high energy level. But I'm very conscious of energy levels. And I haven't seen anything like this with a group of people since that period of time, or felt it. Which I must say, I'm glad. [Laughs.] Once is enough, or at least once. But anyway, the people were working like hell. I don't think you would have dared not work. Maybe you would have lost your position within the group if you didn't.

[00:57:00.43]

But also, too, energy breeds energy. And hell, I see this all the time. I can walk in, if I'm energetic in a classroom and get a few people going, pretty soon the whole class is affected by this. And the ones who can't hack it drop out and take another class. If I'm feeling introverted or a little bit down, or a little bit disinterested, the energy level will drop off. So this does happen. And I forgot what I was saying. Ask me your question.

[00:57:32.13]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: It very much follows from this. You keep talking about an intense energy level that's tremendously active situation. But what about an exchange of ideas? Did these people—a number of interesting people involved—did they, did you talk about art, did you talk about, say, philosophy? Aesthetic ideas?

[00:58:01.29]

JOAN BROWN: No. [Laughs.] No. But my feeling about this, not only within this circumstance, but in any circumstance about anything, that more goes on unsaid than happens. And I think we communicated and exchanged a great deal on the level you're talking about in different ways, maybe in the process of having a wild party or talking about —"Well, now what kind of gin shall we get today?" What kind of cheapo gin. On that kind of level, which people have taken literally, and certainly has also helped to perpetuate, or maybe start this image of this dumb, illiterate area around here.

[00:58:44.70]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: No sense of history and no sense of theory, no seriousness.

[00:58:47.14]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah, no sense of anything. Just a bunch of dopes and slobs is what it comes down to. That more went on that level than ever had to be talked about. Of course, in a classroom situation, it was different. Elmer, who I still like very much to exchange art ideas with, and talk to—on a classroom level, yes, there certainly was some of this going on, a relationship between all the people I'm talking about, whether it's poets and musicians or painters. Together or separately, none that I know of. But we sure as hell did communicate. I think a lot of people crapped out, that this era was exhausting for a lot of people. And they really blew too much. I feel I got out while the going was good, in a sense. Not that I shaped up, because I didn't. And I was a waster in other ways. But it left a lot of people depleted, some temporarily, and maybe some permanently depleted.

[00:59:56.49]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: What were the parties like? You keep—these parties are famous. And so I feel—

[01:00:01.50]

JOAN BROWN: There was so goddamn much drinking, you couldn't believe it. And I've been drinking to the point of senselessness where, say—well, we were at a party on Sunday. Okay, now, most of the people there certainly remember going home and what time they left, and things like that. There's a few who didn't, and some for who was a little bit vague. My last part of the party was slightly vague. But nevertheless, I wasn't carried home or anything. But at these parties, everybody was so worked up anyway, and would get more worked up with the alcohol and the grass. Although, it was the poets who were doing all the grass smoking, not the artists at that time, or very few. But everybody gets so worked up. You just would be blotto. So it was real excessive kind of behavior.

[01:00:57.34]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Would there be dancing?

[01:00:59.20]

JOAN BROWN: Oh, yeah, dancing like crazy.

[01:01:00.96]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Or were they sort of dour beatnik of type periods where everybody wore black, and were depressed—

[01:01:05.17]

JOAN BROWN: No, no. The poets used to stand on one side of the room, and the artists would be acting up, dancing, and jumping up and down and stuff like that, and falling down. And then the poets would eventually join. Wally was a great one for joining. He liked to dance. And jeez, even McClure started dancing, which was, I guess, giving everybody a break. Oh, Wally always danced. Well, he played. And then he danced when he didn't.

[01:01:29.00]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: You said Wally. You mean Wally Berman?

[01:01:30.28]

JOAN BROWN: Wally Berman, yeah. He liked to dance, right. And he was acting—He was different. He wasn't so cool. Or, he's naturally cool. He doesn't have to come on like he's cool. But we were like babies in a sense, I think, compared to what goes on today in terms of what they talk about as sexually permissive and stuff. Sure, Jay'd get drunk once in a while and she'd take her clothes off. Let's see. I think I was dancing in my bra and a skirt one time, which was far out.

[01:02:01.36]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Outrageous.

[01:02:01.89]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah, and because it was hot. And that's about as far as it went. So in that sense, there was no—like people think of, oh, wild artists, or maybe at that time as being tremendously sexually permissive. And there was this and that. It was a very moral group. Very, very moral. Sure, there were a few affairs here and there, and baby kind of affairs, silly stuff. But they were innocent. As much as I talk about all this craziest drunkenness and stuff, they were very innocent. And there was a lot of good feeling among the people.

[01:02:40.93]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: What about Wally Berman? He's become a fairly, very interesting artist and is beginning to emerge a little bit from the underground. And I've never really been able to determine—He spent, I think, about three or four years here, I'm not sure.

[01:02:59.13]

JOAN BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[01:03:02.89]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: And I wonder what kind of—what effect his presence had, if any, or if—

[01:03:09.07]

JOAN BROWN: Tremendous effect. And again, it was all under cover, or all psychically. I sound like I'm some kind of a mystic or something, using that word. But I believe very strongly in it. Where Wally would never—this is hard for people to understand from other—especially from New York. And they say to me, "Oh, you're full of crap."

[END OF TRACK AAA_brown75_7966_m]

[00:00:03.82]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Archives of—

[Recorder stops; restarts.]

Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, a second interview with Joan Brown, on July 15, 1975. [Recorder stops; restarts.]

[00:00:31.21]

JOAN BROWN: Excuse me for chewing up these nuts. See, I have to eat regularly. With these swims coming up, I have to eat all the time.

[00:00:38.17]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Right. Right. Please, eat as much as you want.

[00:00:39.06]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah, so nuts are very good for you. But anyway, what I was saying on the other side was my response to a question that you asked, and that question was, "Did you guys, did you people, persons, whatever the hell, talk much, exchange ideas, talk much about art or ideas, techniques, hopes, desires, that you had in relation to what you did, whether it was the poets and painters, or what have you?"

[00:01:12.26]

And I said no, that I felt that much, much more went on than if we had, either spontaneously or on purpose, sat down to discuss ideas of art, that more was exchanged and said on a psychic basis, going through the motions of a party while involved with mixing drinks or what have you, or dancing, more communication went on and went on about art than could have happened verbally.

[00:01:52.49]

And that this is a very hard thing, I would feel, for someone coming from New York—that's where I ended on the last take—who is so used to a more formal kind of setup, where you go visit each other's studios and exchange ideas or ask questions about what so-and-so is doing, or go to art discussions all the time to hear so-and-so talk. Jeez, we didn't have any of those. Now they're fairly popular around here.

[00:02:19.27]

And the museums, at least the Berkeley Museum, San Francisco Museum, regularly have guest speakers, or they have deals out at San Francisco State. And the Art Institute is constantly bringing people out to explain what their motivations and ideas are regarding their work. We didn't have any of that around, and we didn't need it. I'm not saying it's not necessary now. These times were different. But yes, we communicated, but on a different level. And again, that sounds like some sort of dingbat mysticism.

[00:02:49.40]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Not really.

[00:02:49.81]

JOAN BROWN: [Laughs.] Bay Area mysticism.

[00:02:51.43]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: If that's—yeah, if that's the way it was, that's the way it was. But what about, then, the—not so much a verbal exchange, a sort of self-conscious intellectual exchange, but what about seeing one another's work? Obviously, there must have been some sort of give and take.

[00:03:06.80]

JOAN BROWN: Darn right, we were influenced, and this would come out, again, in the work itself, and not so much in terms of discussion. In fact, very, very seldom—jeez, I can't remember sitting around—I talk a lot more now about art than I ever did in all those years put together. I'll talk about more now in a week than I will four or five years.

[00:03:34.46]

And this had nothing to do with—now, somebody can misinterpret this tape and think, oh, well, you know, you were a woman, and the guys at that time were all talking about art and you were left out, because I've heard women talk about that—not from this period of time. The people, the women who were around, like Jay and stuff, they wouldn't say that because that didn't exist. But, for instance, in Miriam Schapiro's catalog for her show down in [Los Angeles –Ed.] Or maybe it was in that women's center. I don't know what the hell it was, but she talks about having been excluded.

And even when she talked with another woman artist at that time, you talked about hairdos and clothes and what's for dinner, and you wouldn't dare have talked about these things. Well, none of us talked about these things, and it wasn't because anyone was differentiating, including myself, between male and female. It's just that there was no need to, and the influences, of course, would come out in the work itself. I know Manuel and I always influenced each other a great deal, way before we were ever together. When we first met, we were just sympathetic and, I guess, responsive to the kind of work and attitude behind the work that each other did. And we automatically clicked in terms of work and have on and off over the years. Although, that's really—it's drifting now. It's further apart, but—

[00:04:59.67]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Who else, in your case?

[00:05:01.27]

JOAN BROWN: In my case, maybe Wally Hedrick, to a point—not the work of Wally Berman, but Wally's attitude. I would say Wally [Berman –Ed.] was one of the most supportive people to me without ever any kind of overt encouragement. It was an attitude. It was a deep kind of understanding and encouragement and bond between Wally Berman—see, jeez, I'm

talking about two Wallys here. I'd better distinguish which is what—that Wally Berman, I was tremendously influenced by, but by him as a person, not by his work.

[00:05:44.99]

And he just stood for the whole idea of, to me, of an individual. And maybe I couldn't have articulated it at the time, but of course, now I have. Well, you follow your nose, and you do what's right for you, and he sensed that how I was, and what I was doing was very right for me. And I really feel he got those feelings and that message across to me extremely clearly. Although, again, it was not verbal.

[00:06:14.68]

We were not literally a verbal bunch, and we didn't need to be at that time. But now that whole attitude's turned into a stupid thing, which really bugs the hell out of me. But Wally Hedrick, let's see, I would say maybe his work influenced me a bit because, again, it was kind of—it was definitely individual, and it was kind of funny, too, kind of goofy.

[00:06:44.30]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: What period would that be?

[00:06:45.89]

JOAN BROWN: That's where he did stuff like painting, "Jay, Me, and Cat," and he just had these big sort of shapes. And he'd kind of scribble things on top, and I responded to a lot of that stuff. Again, the influence, say that if I had it that strongly—I don't think it was that strongly by Wally. I'm just kind of pulling things out, feelings, not pulling ideas out. I'm pulling feelings out of my head and my heart—that this kind of influence, if so, did not come out literally in my paintings. In other words, I wasn't making scribbles on top or big shapes, anything like that. But in a sense, he did.

[00:07:30.52]

Jay's stuff, I never cared that much for, although, I respected what she did, and Jay, herself, tremendously, and her dedication and her compulsiveness and craziness. But personally, I never cared for the work that much. Let's see, whose work did I like? I liked a lot of the stuff Manuel was doing. I liked Bischoff's stuff very much, very much. The younger people—

[00:08:09.69]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: What about Roy De Forest?

[00:08:11.29]

JOAN BROWN: Never cared for Roy's stuff. I like Roy. Again, I respect Roy. He's tough. Boy, he's stuck with it all these years, and no matter what the situation been, he's kind of kept an even keel and kept his nose to the grindstone for his own personal reasons. And I take Roy very seriously. I think he's a serious artist. I don't like his things. I don't like his imagery. I don't like his busyness. I don't like his—even some technical things, like his form.

[00:08:42.31]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, I think that's very interesting, because superficially, at least, I think that some people would see some sort of connection—

[00:08:51.33]

JOAN BROWN: Between mine and his?

[00:08:52.44]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Yeah, just on a superficial basis. I mean, for instance, dogs, you know, which is not [inaudible]—

[00:08:57.20]

JOAN BROWN: Roy always like my dogs. He always want to trade me something for one of my dogs, and we never got around to it.

[00:09:04.47]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: While we're talking about this—

[00:09:06.49]

JOAN BROWN: Maybe I'm saying Roy was influenced by my dogs. I probably am. Go ahead.

[00:09:09.83]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Fine. Okay. Now we've got that on record.

[00:09:11.87]

JOAN BROWN: All right.

[00:09:13.96]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: What we're basically talking about, or part of what we're talking about, is interactions between artists, the flux of influence, something that ties in to the notion of a Bay Area style or aesthetic, which is a big topic, and I don't know that it's one that we can dispatch easily.

[00:09:37.36]

JOAN BROWN: Okay. One of the aesthetics is just what we were talking about earlier, you and I, and has to do with the questions you're asking. And there was a common mutual understanding that you didn't have to talk about it, just do it, and that was a kind of an unspoken rule. So outsiders—Mark di Suvero never felt at home here. He always sort of got run out psychically. [Laughs.] He got—not literally, because he's so damn loud and aggressive. But he was always out of place. He was always trying to get something going around here with all kinds of people and everybody gave him the brush-off. That was an unspoken rule.

[00:10:15.87]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: You feel that there is, though, a unifying Bay Area aesthetic, something that seems indigenous—

[00:10:22.44]

JOAN BROWN: There was.

[00:10:22.83]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: —something that stamps the look or feel of art produced in this area.

[00:10:27.91]

JOAN BROWN: No more. I don't feel that way anymore. I feel, in a sense, this area is like many, many other areas. And what I'm about to say could be said about any other area, too, L.A. or New York. I feel people are drawn here for the particular kind of energies that San Francisco offers. And now, this is whether it's you—I'm not just talking about visual artists—whether it's you, or people that choose to work here.

I think Oldenburg, sure, he comes back on business reasons, but there's something about the area that draws him to this, a certain kind of energy which does exist in the area. It's not peaked like it was during the times you and I are talking about, in the late '50s, maybe into the very, very early '60s—not the middle '60s—the very early '60s. And there's a particular kind of energy which draws people here for their own interior reasons.

[00:11:27.08]

But other than that, I think anything else is superficial, that if people think—I hear kids at graduate schools talking, when I've traveled, those few places I've gone, like University of

Illinois, and they want to come out and get into the Funk movement. They want to be funky and put on cowboy suits and act really stupid [laughs] out here like they think everyone else does.

[00:11:49.58]

I've witnessed—I've read some of the most embarrassing, hideous letters written to kids applying from other places to the graduate programs in the Bay Area, especially at the University of California, with the stuff like, "Hiya, folks," you know, trying on purpose to appear to be real stupid, to fit in. And that's what I mean by there's a superficial stamp on this area which people.

[00:12:20.00]

NOEL NERI: Hi.

[00:12:20.24]

JOAN BROWN: Hi, Noel. How you doing?

[00:12:21.89]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: How are you?

[00:12:22.14]

NOEL NERI: Fine.

[00:12:23.85]

JOAN BROWN: Did you get some lunch?

[00:12:25.01]

NOEL NERI: Yeah.

[00:12:25.66]

JOAN BROWN: Good.

[00:12:27.54]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Let's talk about Funk art a little bit. You brought it up.

[00:12:30.72]

JOAN BROWN: [Laughs.] I brought it up.

[00:12:31.67]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: And it's—you brought the term up.

[00:12:33.13]

JOAN BROWN: Oh, God, I hate this stuff.

[00:12:33.54]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, that's, then, part of the part of the answer. You, though, were included in the Funk show.

[00:12:40.99]

JOAN BROWN: I sure was, uh-huh [affirmative].

[00:12:42.18]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: And I know that there's a lot of resistance to the very term and notion around here in the area that's supposed to be the capital of Funk art, or at one time. How do

you feel about it? Do you feel that there is any sort of legitimacy in—well, let's say, not just in the term, but in the artists that were brought together in that show as exemplifying a Bay Area, right?

[00:13:11.59]

JOAN BROWN: Oh, in that show that Peter Selz put on?

[00:13:13.49]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Yeah.

[00:13:13.72]

JOAN BROWN: Oh, no. God, there were only—there were so few people who filled the bill of what I know to be and what I think, which can be two completely different things, to be what's considered, or what I consider Funk art, and I think it's long gone. It was a particular kind of attitude more than a look. It was an attitude, because my things looked at that time entirely different from George Herms. Wally Berman's things were neat as a pin. He was—Wally's a very neat guy.

[00:13:51.80]

And people assumed from that time, if either it's done sloppy, looking like you don't give a damn, or that if the shapes are kind of ratty, organic shapes, rather than slick, stylized shapes, that therefore that's funky, too. Or if you have some really stupid, asinine idea that you're able to get across, that that's funky, anything stupid is funky.

[00:14:23.95]

And most of the people in that Selz show were either accidentally in there, because he was all screwed up about what he thought it was, or they were people who later on were trying to cash in on something they thought existed much more than it did. And, oh, what I mean by this funky thing, was an attitude that was particular, again, to this place, to this period of time, and probably starting in the early '50s with attitudes such as Wally had, and maybe reaching a climax, reaching its peak again in the early '60s.

[00:15:04.09]

And there was a kinship that we all felt with this kind of attitude, certainly Bruce Conner. Jeez, he was delighted when he came here and tuned in to people like Hedrick—of course, he knew Berman—and myself. And George Herms, there was a destructiveness which people are interested in and have various theories about. There's one guy who interviewed me said, maybe it was—maybe it's this area, again, the psychic energies of this area, knowing we're in this earthquake area, and, you know, which anything can go at any—that the moment counts more, the day. And—

[00:15:46.97]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, then why wouldn't Los Angeles be a Funk art center, which really [inaudible].

[00:15:51.18]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah. Right. This is, I'm just right now talking off the top of my head. I'm not saying I agree with that at all.

[00:15:56.70]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: No, I get it.

[00:15:58.17]

JOAN BROWN: No, I think it's rather shallow and rather dumb. But people do sense this kind of destructiveness, and the moment, the "eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die" attitude, which was very prevalent at that time, and therefore make up their theories. But there was an almost delight, I guess there was a rebellion, basically, against slicker—against

good materials.

[00:16:27.99]

There was a conscious—a delight taken in using ratty materials, the rattier, the better. Jeez, we all thought George Herms was great when he made those things out of tar and chicken feathers and stuff like that, and Bruce's babies with the nylon stocking. And, hell, even somebody like Elmer and I used the worst stretcher bars and the worst paint in the world, and they've held up beautifully, which is nice.

[00:16:53.10]

I feel bad now when things fall apart. I feel guilty. I feel destructive and like I'm not taking myself seriously—I'm not doing justice to myself, not because of posterity or because they're worth anything or even that I think they're good. But my God, it's an attitude which I no longer have. Although, I'll still using the enamel paint and stuff like that, but not to be cheap, not—on purpose because it's convenient.

[00:17:17.75]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: But you do that for the aesthetic effect?

[00:17:20.33]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah, that's right. But, you know, at some point, I asked myself, you know, Jesus, what are you doing? On one hand this is what you're spending the majority of your energies and time and interest throwing yourself into, and yet you're denying it by purposefully hoping or getting a kick out of the fact that it's going to fall apart tomorrow.

[00:17:41.41]

And there's something wrong there. I outgrew that destructiveness, hopefully, and yeah, I didn't like that part of myself. But at the time, we all had this very strongly, and we would take perverse pleasure, and rightly so, rebelling against all this, the Brancusi—say, Manuel, with his way of working against the Brancusi way of polishing and slicking and, oh, Christ, this will last forever, and blah, blah, blah, the right marble.

[00:18:07.24]

Also, it fitted these spontaneous ways of working, which only these materials can afford you to do—or can you afford to do with these materials. Jeez, I'm phrasing stuff all crazy. It had to do with the energy at the time. We were all electric, and in a hurry, and in this terrible hurry. I don't know where we were all going—I thought we were going, but in a big hurry to do something.

[00:18:36.41]

So naturally, working with these materials, you can work very fast. You can work spontaneous. You can change them instantaneously, almost. You know, Manuel would put plaster on real fast, take a hatchet and cut that arm off, throw it away, 20 minutes later, he's got a new one on there. And, jeez, it's same with painting. You just don't even bother mixing anything. You just take this out with a trowel, slap it on. You can wipe it off the next second or push it somewhere else, elsewhere.

[00:19:02.68]

And there's tremendous spontaneity added to the energy. It was taken from the energy that was going on and then also added to the energy that was happening. And this is what I think was labeled later on a funky way of working. But it was an attitude. It wasn't the look. It was an attitude. We would use the word ourselves. It's amazing to see that word around now. It was such a foreign word at the time.

[00:19:32.56]

We would use it, and where I first heard it was from musicians, down in The Cellar, and say, jeez, that, say, like Thelonious Monk was considered to be very funky, and Miles Davis was very smooth, very slick. And that's where I connected to the word. But again, it was a

feeling, the feelings that were evoked. It isn't something you just stamp off there.

[00:20:01.07]

And so then as people started zeroing in from outside areas, we never paid any attention to it. People from outside areas come in and start labeling all this and that. Then all the copy, all the self-conscious attempts at being funky, starting—you still see them in every graduate school probably in the country at this point, trying to identify with funky, with West Coast art.

[00:20:27.17]

But all our work looked so different, and yet there was this basic kind of irreverence and attitude and spontaneity, whether it was very neat—Jay included, and, boy, her stuff was very much what's called belabored compared to mine or Manuel's and Wally Berman—Christ, neat as a pin. If you were to take him out of the blue now and show him to Peter Selz and say, this guy was around this—just, say, change his name, you know, show the work to Peter Selz. Well, now, say he didn't know what it looked like. You'd say, "Now, would you put this in a Funk show?" "Hell, no. That guy's slick." Wally, he didn't put in the Funk show, Wally Hedrick.

[00:21:04.39]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Yeah, I know. I know.

[00:21:05.42]

JOAN BROWN: Which is amazing. Christ, Wally would make sculptures out of beer cans now.

[00:21:09.47]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Right.

[00:21:11.12]

JOAN BROWN: Because he could make them right away. And they were beer, and he liked beer. And that's all we did, was drink beer. And he liked Christmas trees, because we always had a million Christmas trees, and he liked these—and he does that. And that's what I mean by attitude. There's a directness and a childlikeness, but not a self-conscious, being stupid and refusing to use your head, because Wally, at least then, had an excellent mind.

Christ, he's smart as hell, not only worldy, in a worldly sense. Well, he's kind of lost that. You know, he's smart about people and stuff. But, yeah, he was just smart in an academic sense, and Wally Berman is probably a genius in just about every respect. So it had nothing to do with his lack of intelligence. It was the energy and his spirit, and it was right for the times. And that was it.

[00:21:57.44]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Do you suppose that the directness and, let's say, carelessness of the way some of these so-called Funk objects were put together, had anything to do with the patronage in this area? In other words, it was unlikely that they were going to be sold anyway.

[00:22:18.83]

JOAN BROWN: I'm sure that's so.

[00:22:19.12]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Is this right or wrong?

[00:22:20.27]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah, I would say that that's part of it.

[00:22:21.53]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: They really were done for yourself.

[00:22:23.97]

JOAN BROWN: Absolutely. And with a lot of the people still working, they still are done for ourselves. [Laughs.] I include myself very strongly in that.

[00:22:31.84]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Because patronage has improved in this area. Certainly, there are more collectors. I guess there were virtually none. There were one or two, or so.

[00:22:41.28]

JOAN BROWN: And, too, it was the times. You know, art was—aesthetic art, creativity, was beauty. And, hell, what in the world—how could anyone identify beauty with one of those baby dolls strapped in a high chair, covered with a half burnt—covered with a nylon stocking, Bruce Conner's—people were repulsed, and they were horrified by this, and it was the anti of what they considered at that time to be art.

[00:23:07.42]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, did you participate in this anti-art phenomenon, or would you characterize it as anti-art?

[00:23:17.57]

JOAN BROWN: Yes and no. I think it was—nothing's ever clear-cut anymore. I don't care what it is, nothing is all one way or one thing.

[00:23:26.65]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: But was this a part of it, I guess?

[00:23:26.88]

JOAN BROWN: The anti-art was part of it, the pleasure. I can look back and remember feeling some of the same—feel pleasure at the fact that my sculpture sitting over there was made out of rags that I found in the studio, and string and cardboard.

[00:23:43.49]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: You mean the elephant foot?

[00:23:45.48]

JOAN BROWN: Oh, no, that's not my—that's real. That's a real elephant.

[00:23:47.97]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: That's a real elephant foot? Where is your piece, then? The rat, you mean? Oh, yeah. Oh, this one. Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And that is the piece that was—

[00:24:01.67]

JOAN BROWN: [Speaking from a distance] [Inaudible] that, and [inaudible] think, oh, jeez, good old George Herms has got the tar, he's got the chicken feathers, all this stuff. Boy, that's pretty ratty. Sure, there was an anti-art, but it wasn't just that. You can't keep working if you're just rebelling. Nobody can keep on going. That runs out. That's not an interior reason. That's an exterior reason. So along with what I'm referring to, the anti-art was an exterior reason. And it was real, and it was there. But the interior reasons are what made people keep going, and those had to do, again, with feeling.

[00:24:43.98]

And sometimes, I guess, the cart was before the horse, and we thought we were working for anti-art reasons. Or I did. I shouldn't say "we" at this point. I'm just going to talk about myself. I kept on working thinking it was anti-art reasons, and maybe that would just be the

kick-off that would get me going, to get into myself and come up with things that I felt very deeply and very strongly towards. I was able to put these feelings and thoughts into form and use the anti-art reason. Other times, people would work—I would work for interior reasons and also enjoy the fact that these were on just the crappiest stretcher bars in the world, and all that.

[00:25:33.12]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, some of your work with them, and the sneakiness you admire in the Egyptians is coming through.

[00:25:39.97]

JOAN BROWN: That's right.

[00:25:41.37]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Some art historian will pick up on that, by the way.

[00:25:43.70]

JOAN BROWN: I mean, after all, one of Manuel's statements has been, when people put down his plaster—and he loves plaster—is that, Christ, that Egyptian art's held up all these—3,000 years, you've get some heads made out of plaster. Now, what the hell is all this fancy talk about the right—using white lead instead of titanium white, or whatever the hell people promote for their own hang-ups?

[00:26:05.86]

But anyway, that's—I was—oh, yeah. But aside from part of this being for anti-art reasons, these materials did fit someone like myself, who was impatient, and in a terrible hurry, and very, very spontaneous, and working off the top of my head a great deal, which is where I feel I discover— Still, I say "discover," not "discovered"—discover a lot of valuable things that are going on which are not in my just intellectual or conscious frame of references.

[00:26:43.88]

And these materials afford one to work in this spontaneous kind of fashion, so it's a dual thing. It's both a satisfaction, or was, at, "my, how anti-art I am," and also that these were very necessary to get to other, deeper, richer, more interior reasons for working. Does that make sense? Is it paradoxical? I'm setting—

[00:27:05.07]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, really, it wasn't—then your excursions into so-called Funk materials and so forth, it wasn't like a dead end or really a digression. It was very much a part, you feel, of your own development, and that it led to a firmer statement then, I understand.

[00:27:25.67]

JOAN BROWN: Right. But then, as I was trying to say, then as time goes by, I realized that I get mad at myself for still hanging on to the old thrill for using the ratty materials, because there's no reason to rebel anymore. And the richer, the more interior reasons are more out front than they were then, so I say, "Oh, don't be so stupid."

[00:27:49.17]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: But it is part of the building, and you feel that it was very much part of—

[00:27:52.89]

JOAN BROWN: Very much so, and sure—

[00:27:54.49]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: —and contributed to where you are now.

[00:27:56.26]

JOAN BROWN: Right. And this whole gang—right, and this whole gang of people were all involved in that, too.

[00:28:06.33]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, what about—I wanted to ask you just briefly about your observations on Bay Area art, as this has been the location, really, for your career.

[00:28:19.69]

GORDON COOK: Hi, Paul.

[00:28:20.12]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Hi, Gordon.

[00:28:20.80]

GORDON COOK: How are you?

[00:28:21.63]

JOAN BROWN: Maybe we ought to—

[Recorder stops; restarts.]

[00:28:25.95]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: So, I've asked the question. Let's see what gets going.

[00:28:31.52]

JOAN BROWN: Okay. What question? [Laughs.]

[00:28:33.90]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, your observations of the special quality of Bay Area art, what maybe is unique about it, the circumstances that may be different?

[00:28:45.93]

JOAN BROWN: Well, we were talking about other areas seem to think—artists in other areas seem to think in more linear terms. And you were saying it's easier to write about art in other areas than it is here, or it seems so to you. And I think it probably is. And other areas, they have a background. New York, for instance, my God, it really has a backlog of history.

[00:29:15.07]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: It has real art history, that's true.

[00:29:16.11]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah, real art history. And artists tend to think that way. They latch on to that, and they think in linear kind of terms from what has happened, into future terms, or present terms like the avant-garde—this is old hat, and this is current, and this is avant-garde. And I think many artists here, older ones, people who come from this area, tend to think a little bit—I mean, people who come to this area think a bit different, but people here think more in circular terms rather than linear terms. There is not this concern, in fact, among some artists, such as myself, but I've talked to others—such as myself, I do not believe there is such there is anything such as avant-garde.

[00:30:01.99]

And I'll take that all the way—this is one of the theories, I will say, for me is a theory—I'll take

that all the way down through art history. I don't think there's such a damn thing as the avant-garde. But if one is thinking in literal terms, it's much easier for critics or writers, whatever, to—who tend to think this way in general because it's easier, and I don't mean that as really a slam. It's easier. It gives you a handle. It makes more sense to think in linear terms, past, present, future. It gives them a handle, and the artists—

[00:30:38.48]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: And key problems.

[00:30:38.53]

JOAN BROWN: Pardon?

[00:30:39.91]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: And key problems.

[00:30:41.00]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah. Right. And especially if artists think this way, too, and if the artists think this way, the work shows that. But here, it's more of a circular kind of thinking, where one is moving, where it's a cycle. That's what I mean by circle, too. Gordon calls it a lump. I call it more of a circle, where you're evolving, you're moving around. You leave points, and then later on you come back to them, and—points, ideas, what have you—pick them up, take off again, and that the evolvement, that the development, that the growth is in more of a circular fashion than in a linear, straight-line way.

[00:31:24.14]

And I think that's the big difference here, and somewhat conscious. Maybe one of the differences is that it's more of a conscious consciousness. People are consciously aware—some people are consciously aware of thinking this way and noticing that there's a difference here than other areas. Maybe some area, who knows what's—in Denver, how people's minds are operating within the community. But here, it has been a talked-about thing from time to time, and there's a consciousness of it. And it's different—

[00:31:58.51]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, how do you suppose—

[00:31:59.74]

JOAN BROWN: People get repetitive. Go ahead.

[00:32:02.29]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: No, this came about, though—is there something—I don't want to talk so much about the geography.

[00:32:09.13]

JOAN BROWN: Maybe one reason is because we don't have a past, a sense of history, as New York City has. What were you going to say? I think you were going to say something very interesting about that.

[00:32:18.88]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, no, I'm sure it wasn't very interesting but—

[00:32:21.01]

JOAN BROWN: Well, I think it might have been to me. Go ahead and say it.

[00:32:24.07]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Let's see if I can remember how it goes. There's something about this area, okay, if there is a different expression from what is, quotes, "mainstream" American

art, which Los Angeles, in a sort of divergent way, has participated in. It also doesn't have a tradition, a real art history, but somehow it hooked in with an axis.

[00:32:49.81]

JOAN BROWN: Right. Yeah. Yeah, I would agree with that.

[00:32:52.36]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Certainly, in the '60s the formal problems, in many cases, were even created there—perceptual problems.

[00:32:58.63]

JOAN BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative], and taken to New York, to the East Coast, and not here, not here.

[00:33:00.59]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Yeah, and so there was this exchange. Now, I don't want to get into this regional discussion particularly, but for some reason, San Francisco, which has a remarkable creative history, especially when you consider its size and the lack of patronage and so forth, that it has continued. What is it? Is there something about isolation here that has to do with the look of the art? Is there something about the artist's self-conception in the Bay Area, whether it's artificial or factual, that contributes to a special look?

[00:33:43.64]

JOAN BROWN: I think the artist's self-conception comes after the fact that the self-conception is a byproduct of what actually is taking place. This is an isolated area, I think, and I'm always embarrassed talking this way. [Laughs.] I hate to be classified as some kind of a nut or something, a nut in this sense.

[00:34:08.03]

I think that location has a great deal to do with it. I think the Pacific Ocean here and San Francisco Bay are very special places. I think the light that happens, that takes place, that we're exposed to in this city has a great effect on the people that live here. I think there's a close tie-in with the Orient. I'm not talking about because there's a lot of Chinese people that live here. I don't mean literally. I mean more in these more psychic or mystical, whatever damn word—

[00:34:44.34]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Mystical is the key word.

[00:34:44.66]

JOAN BROWN: Mystical, okay, mystical—word you want to give it that is unique to this place and does infiltrate into people who stay here and who pick up on it. I think there are people here, they don't pick up on it. That's okay. Fine, you know, they might as well—they could be in L.A. They could be in New York. And they're just dealing with the obvious.

[00:35:06.08]

And such as we were talking about earlier, "I am this dumb Bay Area artist. I'm Mr. Funk. I got myself a cowboy suit, and now I'm going to do my cutesy ceramic art deco living room sculpture, what have you, because I'm here in this area and this is what's expected." This is what I mean by—elaborating, but what I mean by not picking up and not connecting to what is happening right here.

[00:35:29.07]

And I think these certain kinds of vibrations or energies from this area, that I really do believe have a connection to the Orient, are unique in that certain people find they really need this to bounce off of and continue to stay in this area. Other people need it for a time and go their way. I think if Wally Berman were pinned down, he could articulate this. He was

probably conscious of it back then and could articulate it much better than I can. And—

[00:35:58.50]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: You really think that, Berman, in a way, is a key to this special—

[00:36:03.26]

JOAN BROWN: One of them, yes, one of them.

[00:36:05.27]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Your choice is very interesting because—

[00:36:06.63]

JOAN BROWN: I won't ever say "one"—you know, anything—

[00:36:08.23]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: No, no, I realize that, but we have—you mentioned them several times

[00:36:10.81]

JOAN BROWN: I'd say one of them, yes. Yeah.

[00:36:12.29]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: But what's—

[00:36:12.59]

JOAN BROWN: And this is what was left out of my catalog. I've spent some time talking to Brenda about Wally Berman, but unfortunately, because literally there is no connection made, my God, what he did and what I do, sure, it's easy to identify me with Elmer. Maybe I talk more about Elmer because I knew him as a student. I've known Elmer longer. I still know him. We hang out together. We really like each other. And, you know, as couples, we're tight.

[00:36:36.17]

But this—this was left out of my catalog, and I'm sorry that I didn't know that this wasn't made more of a point of. Yes, I think Wally is not only very important to me, but was important to this area, and genuinely connected to it, and then went back to L.A. and found that his connections at that time, and still remain, to me, in that area, which has its own set of energies and is no less and no more than—

[00:37:02.99]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Right, right. Sure.

[00:37:03.56]

JOAN BROWN: —here in New York or any other damn place. But I think there's a close tie-in with the Orient.

[00:37:09.31]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Let me ask you this, again, maybe moving a little far afield, or free association.

[00:37:16.26]

JOAN BROWN: That's okay. I like that.

[00:37:17.13]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: What about Ed Kienholz? Now, the whole problem with building

stereotypes and trying to describe areas is that there are so many exceptions to the rule. There's somebody like Bruce or—I mentioned Bruce Conner, but Ed Kienholz, who is probably one of the great examples of something that's very much associated with San Francisco.

[00:37:43.75]

JOAN BROWN: Oh, to me, it was L.A. I was going to say, "Oh, he's so L.A."

[00:37:47.12]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, then, what is the strong difference? Is it in a point of view? I mean, we're talking about expression—

[00:37:53.08]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah, it's in an attitude.

[00:37:53.51]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: —an assemblage, and so forth, collage and—

[00:37:55.82]

JOAN BROWN: Oh, both, I would say, technically, as well as an attitude. And of course, the technique is a way to describe the attitude, so I really shouldn't separate them and more lump them into one. But Ed was always so L.A. I met Ed through Altoon—

[00:38:15.44]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: That's interesting.

[00:38:16.79]

JOAN BROWN: —and I guess through Irving Blum ["Bloom"]—Blum ["Blum"].

[00:38:21.56]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Blum.

[00:38:22.22]

JOAN BROWN: Blum—and Walter [Hopps –Ed.], and then again several times through Wally Berman and Dean Stockwell. And he used to live right near when Dean Stockwell was married to that other—that movie star who played Anne Frank, Molly Perkins or Millie Perkins, whatever her name is. They lived—Kienholz and his wife at that time lived nearby, and he always struck me as being a real used-car-salesman type. He was much, much louder than anybody I knew from here, and much shrewder, obviously shrewder. Maybe he really wasn't, but on the surface, he was very sure. "Hiya, baby," you know, and the tough guy act, not just with me, but with guys, too. I'm sure Manuel was intimidated by him also.

[00:39:13.53]

And he had that tough guy act at Barney's Beanery, where we used to go all the time, because we used to go down to L.A. a couple times a year and hang out and be stupid [laughs] for three or four days, and just be dumb. But anyway, he was always—kind of held court at Barney's Beanery. And he was heavy at the table and stuff like this. And his things—and I remember seeing his things. What do they call them, tableaus, now?

[00:39:48.72]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Yeah. Right. Well, like Barney's Beanery itself, isn't it?

[00:39:51.39]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah, well, what did we call them at the end, constructions or something? I don't know, whatever word was popular. But his were on so much more of a grand scale than what was being done up here, what the—the work was much more modest here, and I think

his work is just typical L.A., where everything is done on a grander scale. And, hell, you put up a—

[00:40:12.79]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Sort of a holiday spectacular?

[00:40:13.65]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah, you put up a Doggie Diner, and, hell, it makes these places here look like little outhouses or something. Everything is done up and on and this grandiose way of working. And here you'd have, you know, George Herms burnt books about this big, or maybe a couple, or Bruce would do the one image of the baby in a high chair, something else in there. He would do this ultra-extravagant work.

[00:40:37.68]

Maybe, too, it was—maybe he had more—they had more money down there, too. He could afford to get these big cars and do this and that. And at least here it was entirely different. Ours was on a more intimate, much, much physically smaller, less extravagant, less expensive scale than down there. So I don't associate anything that he did with what went on here, but I liked his stuff. No put-down, but I saw it as different, at that time, as what, 20-foot paintings in New York. That's how different it was from this area, not only from what I did, but from everyone else, too.

[00:41:14.10]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: That's very interesting because one of the things that's associated with this area from that period is collage and assemblage.

[00:41:22.09]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah, his was entirely, entirely different. And just, I want to make a big point of the fact that I am—and I think some of the people who were around here at that time did not take things literally at all. Just because somebody worked in collage didn't mean that they were together, that they were all doing the same thing, of if somebody worked in oil paint.

[00:41:47.37]

But this was a particular way of working, and we regarded things just as different as night and day and went past the physical approach towards these things, past the language, into the essence. And I think that was unique for the time, too, because we're all much more—or students are now, and the students I deal with, oh, are, shallower. Jeez, I'm praising that time, putting down this time. I don't mean to do that, because there's been good and bad, and in fact, I prefer to be around now, frankly. But there's less of looking past the obvious and taking everything so goddamn literally. There was less of that then than there is now. That was a difference.

[00:42:43.37]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:42:43.55]

JOAN BROWN: You know—

[Recorder stops; restarts.]

[00:42:47.52]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: We're talking about basically what it's like to be an artist, a serious artist, working in this particular geographical region, the Bay Area, with its special qualities, and so forth. One of the qualities of the Bay Area, at least according to myth, is the is that of isolation, that artists choose to work—it's almost like a self-imposed exile. And I was wondering what your feelings are about that, how it affects one's work attitudes.

[00:43:24.83]

JOAN BROWN: Right. It's not that much of an exile as people might make it out to be. As I said, as I've been saying earlier, in the '50s to the early '60s, there was a tremendous amount of energy generated not only from the area but among the artists themselves, and artists in different fields, visual as well as the poets and the musicians. And so, my god, there was a tremendous lot of exchange and activity going on. And now, of course, there is energy in terms of more commercial deals than there were at the time. Galleries have sprung up a lot. Not that there always weren't a few, but there's a lot more than there are now.

[00:44:17.20]

And so that there can be—one can have a very broad social life if they so wish, broad in the sense there's something to do about four or five times a week, if you're in the right circles, or if you so desire to be in the right circles. Last week, for instance, we agreed or were in the mood to socialize, and we went to four different social occasions during the week, which is way, way too much for me.

[00:44:40.91]

And so that's one of the benefits of the area. You can either keep to yourself or you can socialize like hell. And there's no hard—one of the differences, too, I think, in this area, as there may not be in L.A.—and I know within some circles in New York, it's not so, because people really get their feelings hurt and noses out of joint—that is that you can refuse social invitations, say, jeez, I'm busy, I'm doing my own work, I have other things to do, and stay away and be isolated and go about your business and be introverted, and then when you so wish, come back into these circles.

[00:45:22.04]

And there's not much hard feeling, if any at all, and that's nice. You can come and go. There's a freedom. There's a sense of freedom, that you can come and go as you please and be as social or as antisocial as you please, and as long as you're not shitty about it, there's not too much problem that way. And I like that. I prefer that, because I go through long bouts of wanting to be very introverted and very underground, and you know, then other times, which are getting fewer and fewer as time goes by, of being fairly social. But nevertheless, there's still—there's an energy here, even though I am—may choose to be introverted and by myself, there still is this damn psychic energy I've talked about that has to do with this place and this body of water and this—not just because I swim, but in general—with this San Francisco area.

[00:46:14.29]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, what about looking at it more from the standpoint of advancing in a career, which is something artists, one would expect to be concerned with? Aren't there—probably less so now, but weren't there disadvantages—

[00:46:33.24]

JOAN BROWN: Oh, absolutely.

[00:46:34.26]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: —to choosing to work in the San Francisco area, or outside of New York?

[00:46:39.21]

JOAN BROWN: Sure. Yeah, absolutely. And again, it depends on what you want. This area is not better, and it's not worse, in many respects, than other areas. People go to places for what they need, what they want. If I, as an artist, had wanted to advance my social career for the time, it probably would have been reversed, but if at the time, in the '60s, I had wanted more, I would have—or middle '60s, I would have gone to New York. And, sure, I was—

[00:47:13.55]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Because you were, for a while, a great big splash.

[00:47:16.65]

JOAN BROWN: Oh, I was—yeah. Yes, I—

[00:47:20.26]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: What was it *Artforum* said, "Everybody's Darling"?

[00:47:23.31]

JOAN BROWN: Everybody's—oh, isn't that crappy? Jeez.

[00:47:26.11]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, I don't know. I could understand that.

[00:47:28.51]

JOAN BROWN: Christ.

[00:47:30.13]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: But, I mean, you had an unusually strong start—

[00:47:36.01]

JOAN BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Right here in this area, doing my own thing and never having to compromise, which was very lucky. No, I never went after anything. It came here. And if I'd wanted to exemplify on that, I would have gone there. But that would have run out, too, because things go in cycles and times change and interests change. And the public, or the art public is—and most of the gallery people, are fickle, and rightly so. That's the way things work.

[00:48:06.38]

The exterior part of art is very, very fickle and very, very chancy, so you concentrate on the interior elements, which this area allows you. And I don't mean to the extreme of saying, I'm never going to show again, and if I sell a painting, I'm a whore and blah, blah, blah, again, this goddamn Clyfford Still attitude, which he never stuck to, which all these silly people have just perpetuated about this area. No, I don't mean that either.

[00:48:35.85]

But you decide what's right—what's the most important to you, and, hell, it can be selling. It can really be making a splash, and you'll go on whatever bandwagon happens. And if you know that, you do it consciously and you do it the best you can, fine and dandy. That's terrific. If you know this isn't for you and you have to follow your interior reasons for working, which are important for your own definition as a person, then you go to these funny areas, like this area was.

[00:49:12.15]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Let me put the question a slightly different way, then. Do you feel it's an advantage to work in San Francisco if your interest is in alternative expressions to what is given the stamp of approval by the gallery world? And this is what we're talking about in New York. In other words, if you want to be, if your inclination is to be, let's say, more eccentric, something—

[00:49:44.84]

JOAN BROWN: Not necessarily. A friend of mine, who's probably one of the most eccentric, insular artists I know and, I think, one of the finest artists that I know of these days, works in Denver, Colorado.

[00:49:57.95]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Who is it?

[00:49:58.64]

JOAN BROWN: John Fudge. It's a real name, not a fake name.

[00:50:02.43]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: I haven't heard of him.

[00:50:02.90]

JOAN BROWN: John, he's an old student of mine, and we remain very, very close. In fact, if you're ever interested, God, I've written him over the years. I've written him about paintings, about art. He probably saves all those letters—

[00:50:13.86]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Great.

[00:50:14.78]

JOAN BROWN: —for the last—since '64. He was a student of mine, so for eleven years.

[00:50:21.94]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Sure.

[00:50:22.19]

JOAN BROWN: I bet you—he's that kind of guy. I bet you he's saved everything. I've saved none of his letters. I'm terrible. I don't save anything, or very little.

[Side conversation:] What? Yeah, no, I [inaudible].

[00:50:31.99]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: You'd better start saving them.

[00:50:34.04]

JOAN BROWN: Okay, I'll start saving John's letters. But he, yeah, he's one of the few people I've written personal things to. I really talked about my painting. Maybe because I don't have to see him, I just communicate better. [Laughs.]

[00:50:46.08]

But anyway, here, yeah, I'm losing track of what you said. But, no, I don't feel that you're better off in this area. Again, I'll make a point of, you go to an area because you need what's generating from that particular area. And John, for instance, he's in Denver. His roots are there. That's part of the reason why he's there. But also, hell, he's really affiliated with the mountains and the skies and the particular kind of seasons that this area has.

[00:51:23.65]

Other people I know for years have worked outside of New York City. They worked in New Jersey, and they worked in plenty of places like that. When they need to connect to those exterior kind of energies or to go look at things that are happening, then they go into New York City. But no, it's just, you go where it's comfortable for you. And I—just in exterior ways, too, I really like the compactness of San Francisco. I like compactness.

[00:51:51.94]

That's one of the reasons I have a particular kind of house I have. Everything's right here. It's all around you. You know exactly what's going on, what's right there. And, hell, within an hour or so, you can drive all over the damn city, and you know where everything's laid out. And it's not endless, and you can get from here to there very quickly. And there's a smallness, and it's mainly—I love the seasons. I love the weather here. I love the light. To

me, the seasons change drastically because the light changes ever so subtly.

[00:52:22.27]

And this, I feel. This, I know. Even though I don't work with light, I'm very sensitive to light. And the Bay, the Bay has always been a tremendous attraction for me since I was a child and continues to be. And so I have my own reasons for staying here that are way, way above and past my profession or career.

[00:52:43.44]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Yeah, I understand that very well. What about —you are a woman.

[00:52:49.20]

JOAN BROWN: Mm-hmm. [Laughs.] Yeah, I think so.

[00:52:50.13]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: There's no question about that.

[00:52:51.47]

JOAN BROWN: Oh, I like that. That's nice. [Laughs.]

[00:52:53.67]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: And that goes on the tape.

[00:52:55.26]

JOAN BROWN: Okay, good. Yes, leave that on the tape. Jeez, I got a nice compliment the other day, the best compliment I've had in years at that party the other day. Go ahead, we better not put that on the tape.

[00:53:02.40]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Oh, what was it? What was it?

[00:53:04.89]

JOAN BROWN: David King, the guy I was telling you about—the day before, we'd been at a party—at a party, God, it was one of the other social occasions during the week—at Norman Stiegelmeyer's, and he had a pool. And so I don't wear a bikini swimming, but I wear a bikini for—I mean, I'll wear a tank suit for swimming. A bikini slips, but I wear a bikini for sunning all the time. I'm tan.

[00:53:26.71]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Yeah, I can see that.

[00:53:27.82]

JOAN BROWN: And so I'm tan most of the year round, because it might not be hot, but it's sunny in March and stuff. So I had on my bikini, and I went in the pool because you're not doing any hard swimming in a bikini, at Norman Stiegelmeyer's. And David—and I'm used to wearing a bikini, and I've worn one for years. And I'm not in the least self-conscious, and I have a whole bunch of them.

And so David King said at the party, I guess he had a—he says, "I hope you won't think I'm a sexist saying this, or I hope he won't mind, he said, but you have one of the best bodies I've ever seen. And you're so tan, and especially for your age," and this and that. And people turned around. He said it loud, and people turned around and heard it. And I said, "That's the nicest compliment I've had in years. The hell with the paintings, I said, that makes me feel really good. I really like that."

[00:54:16.83]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: [Laughs.] Right, get down to the basics. That's [inaudible].

[00:54:18.49]

JOAN BROWN: That's right. God, I told Gordon that yesterday. He says, "Oh, how crude of that guy." I said, "Bullshit, I loved it." Yeah.

[00:54:24.93]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: [Laughs.] Well, I think, then, there's no question. We have as evidence that Mr. King's remark at the party the other day. You are a woman, and you are an artist. And these are—

[00:54:34.58]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah. And I liked that comment, and I didn't take it as sexist. It's nice.

[00:54:38.24]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: No. And the fact is, both are facts of your existence, the art and the femaleness. Now, as a professional artist, do you—what problems, if any, have you encountered by being a woman?

[00:55:00.82]

JOAN BROWN: Only in terms of teaching, and not recently, because, jeez, I have a hell of a good job. And I'm sure glad to have that job, and I really like my job. But prior to that, yes, I had trouble in this regard. I think—sometimes I think it was maybe my personality, too—I was a little abrasive or suspicious of the people involved. And I had—might've been rude at parties and things like that, and maybe that had to do with it, too. Although, come to think of it, back in the early days in the Institute when I started teaching, I think just playing—just being a woman was—had something to do with it.

[00:55:43.37]

I'd say another thing had to do with it was that there was jealousy among people here, not my immediate contemporaries, not the Manuels and Jays and Wally Hedrick and the people who were around, but people, oh, maybe four or five years younger who—no, not younger, but who came out of school—in fact, most of them were older because I started school so early. There was a certain amount of jealousy of, "Goddamn it, how does she get to show in New York?"

[00:56:14.05]

You know, and after all, she is a girl, too, she must be sleeping—and there was that kind of goddamn criticism, that, oh, she's probably sleeping with that gallery dealer, which was utterly untrue. I mean, it doesn't matter whether I was or wasn't. It has nothing to do with anything. I wasn't. And if I had been, it would have had nothing to do with the fact that I was showing there at all. And I was always surprised when these things would come up because they had never occurred to me, even from the start, never occurred to—

[00:56:45.40]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Did that hurt you, that type of—

[00:56:47.16]

JOAN BROWN: No, it pissed me off.

[00:56:48.13]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: It made you mad.

[00:56:48.38]

JOAN BROWN: It didn't hurt me. Yeah, and it made me a little snottier than I—or nastier than I might have been. And one of the nastiest comments came from another woman artist in

this area. I entered a show in '58, '59 at the Richmond Museum, was one of those—that was nice about that era, too, which doesn't exist anymore. There were these annuals. As I said, there was a closeness between the museum people and teachers and students and all this, and they'd have these annuals. And, jeez, I entered those annuals from 1957. You know, here I'd only been working a year, and there was this kind of a, oh, leeway or opportunity for young people to enter these, these shows. And I think I got in '57, too. No, no, maybe it was '58. I don't know.

[00:57:40.67]

Anyway, I won a prize. I won a $50 prize, I guess it was, over at the Richmond Museum. And Elmer, my teacher, was one of the jurors. So was Stephen Corn. He wasn't teaching there yet. And I entered a painting which was—I think still is a good painting, because it was in the retrospective and it belongs to someone in Oakland, a non-objective painting. And I won a prize. And that damn Sonia Gechtoff, who was a bitch around here, said, "Oh, well, she's just sleeping with Elmer, that's why she won the prize." I was shocked at that. I thought, that's damn nasty. So really, some of my earliest memories having to do with this damn sexism and separation and identification of being different than what was expected came from someone like that, which—

[00:58:24.86]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: From a woman.

[00:58:25.50]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah, from Sonia. But Sonia was nasty. And Jay, I'm sure, either told you or could tell you—she might have been cool—plenty of stories about Sonia. And they had a big, I mean, a real blowout, and stuff like that. And I was surprised and confused at the time, like, what's the—I thought, oh, Christ, I've had this stuff, heard this stuff in high school, screw it. And that's one recollection I can remember, is being a student. The others were—I knew I was in a minority, but I never thought twice about that. And all my friends were guys. There was never any patronizing or condescending type of attitudes. I was supported like hell, but not in any patronizing way. And I was treated by—

[00:59:14.22]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: And by men apparently.

[00:59:14.50]

JOAN BROWN: Only by men.

[00:59:15.41]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Yeah.

[00:59:15.59]

JOAN BROWN: I was treated the same damn way as, say, by Elmer, as Manuel was or Bill Brown, or so and so, and I was by Frank, and there weren't overtones of things in the wind, you know, because I was a young female, at all. It was really on the up and up, and it was nice. And this, this is how it was, and I wasn't being naive that anything else was going on because it wasn't. I could look back now and say, no, absolutely not. Objectively, I really was supported, by Nate Oliveira—Jesus, you name it, I was—Ralph Du Casse, all kinds of people you know of and don't know of. I was supported like hell, but yet I wasn't patted on the ass and patronized either. Somebody would say, "Oh, yeah, sure, you were supported, but you were patronized." Like, bullshit, I was not, you know, nothing. I was—

[01:00:13.89]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: So your sex, really, to the best of your recollection, was no impediment.

[01:00:19.74]

JOAN BROWN: No, nor an advantage. It wasn't an advantage. I was just there.

[01:00:23.28]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: That's very encouraging.

[01:00:25.10]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah, and I would say this, I would've told you this ten years ago. I'll tell you that thirty years from now. That's exactly how it was. And, boy, I resent people trying to force me into saying that it was any different than it was or that there were any other implications. Oh, well, yes, there might have been sexual implications that were probably on the make, and you didn't realize that; you were naïve. I get this sometimes, and I say, "Bullshit, there was not." Hell, you know, my God, I'm—you know, at this point, I—well, "woman of the world" is bullshit, but I have a better sense of how things are and how people are.

[01:01:00.11]

No, I just got supported like hell. And the only time I realized there was a difference [laughs] in people's attitudes was I had a tough time getting a—making any money teaching, and yet I was competent. I've been a pretty good teacher, I think, pretty much from the start, enthusiastic anyway, and caring. And that goddamn art school—oh, Wally was marvelous. He brought me right in. Again, I could tell he didn't care what anyone's sex is. If he thought they'd be a good teacher, they were, and he was in charge of the night school there.

[01:01:36.11]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Wally Hedrick?

[01:01:36.74]

JOAN BROWN: Wally Hedrick. And, boy, he brought me right in, teaching there. I taught a year in a private high school, which was damn good experience for me. And then after that, during my last year in graduate school, I taught five days a week, hour-and-a-half a day. And boy, I learned a lot because that was really a tough situation. And then Wally brought me in after that, and I taught nights and Saturdays, and I taught nights and Saturdays up until—from '61 'til we went to the [Sacramento –Ed.] Delta in '68. And I asked to teach regularly in the day school. And all the other people who had taught nights, all the guys, got into the day school.

[01:02:11.99]

And then Fred Martin and Bruce McGowan, these other people who ran the school, would not let me teach during the day. And I realized that there was really—this was before the whole woman thing hit. But I realized that there was really a sexist deal going, and it made me resentful—not bitter, but just resentful. I thought, Goddamn it, this isn't fair. Here I am teaching six hours a week, night school, and three hours on Saturday, and the most I'm earning is 365 bucks a month. Everybody else is earning $9,000, $10,000 a year doing this, putting in maybe less hours than I am. And I'm as good as they are, and—

[01:02:53.54]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And so it's really in the academic or the institution, then.

[01:02:57.08]

JOAN BROWN: And it got real crazy—only then—because it got real crazy. I'd have day students coming in, into my night classes, not just women, I mean, men, mainly—boys, males, to study with me because they wanted to work with me in the day school. And they wouldn't—they would never let me—I never taught there days. I think eventually—what was the last time I was there? They gave me one, what's called the graveyard shift. They gave me that 3:30 to 6:30 class. Thanks a lot. And that was the—but the most I ever made teaching there was $365.

[01:03:29.71]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: What time was it, 10:30?

[01:03:31.14]

JOAN BROWN: No, 3:30 to 6:30. That was—

[01:03:32.60]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: 3:30 to 6:30, late afternoon.

[01:03:34.42]

JOAN BROWN: You know, you're—

[01:03:35.01]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Yeah, miss your dinner and—

[01:03:36.39]

JOAN BROWN: —you come into to our day school now. And, yeah, the most I ever made was $365 bucks, and it was not, not fair. And it was on, I feel, on a sexism basis. And yet they knew me. They knew I was reliable and wasn't going to call in and say, "I feel depressed today," or whatever they would've thought one female goes through, you know.

[01:04:09.39]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Exactly. Oh, my God.

[END OF TRACK AAA_brown75_7967_m]

[00:00:05.65]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Joan Brown, July 15, 1975, reel 2, side 2. We've been talking about the special conditions of being not only an artist but a woman artist. And apparently, with the exception of finding a teaching job, perhaps, not so special, or exceptional, in your experience. The next question I'd like to ask you has to do with "the movement," in quotation marks, and feminist art, which, in the last five or six years, has really come to the fore. Feminist art, or as it's more vulgarly called—

[00:00:55.78]

JOAN BROWN: Cunt—

[00:00:59.11]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: —Cunt Art—how do you feel about that? How do you feel that you fit in, or how do you relate to it?

[00:01:04.61]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah, I don't feel that I relate to it, or I fit in, at all. I feel, maybe, that I'm too old. I don't mean that in any negative or self-effacing way but that—here, pass me some more wine. [Laughs.] I'm sure you picked this up in the tape, all that gurgling—

[00:01:27.73]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: It is. It is.

[00:01:29.72]

JOAN BROWN: —going in. Leave that here. That's fine. But that this was not my experience, the experience, experiences, that are spoken of and are defended and are angry-making for the people involved who have had other experiences have not been my own. So abstractly, I can't—because I'm not an abstract person or, what you say, operate on principle—very seldom, once in a while, but very seldom. I just can't jump upon that and say, yes, yes, you're right. This either was my experience, or I feel yours. I don't.

[00:02:11.67]

Jesus, mine was absolutely support. Maybe I just lucked out. Maybe it was the times were different. Maybe that's why. Perhaps there were an exceptionally humane, enlightened group of people involved, which I doubt [laughs], because I don't think there's any damn such thing, other than, maybe, very momentarily. I don't know why. But these were not my experiences. And so, no, I don't feel that I must fight, or I must rebel. And also, too, part of it is me, is that I have a different attitude. I feel art is the byproduct of a person and of one's life, of one's ideas, of one's feelings, of one's follies and foolishness, of all these things. And art is just a byproduct.

[00:03:07.82]

It isn't art over there, and us somewhere, down there or up there, or what have you. But it's just a byproduct of a person. And I'm a woman. I'm a person. I'm a woman. I'm an artist. This I choose to do. It's something that's necessary, something that makes me feel good, and bad, too, but something that's very, very important. And it's secondary that I happen to be a woman. And when I look at things, at pictures, very often, I don't even remember the name, if it's contemporary. Sometimes I don't even look at the name. Maybe most of the time, I don't. And I'm struck by what's going on in the picture. And I never ask myself—in fact, maybe more so I'm aware of it in the past—in the future—now—God, in the present. Shows you how interested I really am in that.

[00:03:59.25]

But I know, in the past, looking at pictures, it never occurred to me to go run to the name and see if it's a male, if it's a female. This is a person. We all share this common kind of experience of coping with ourselves and the world about us and our goals and hopes and failures and all this. And it's never occurred to me who did this, and, oh, this is identifiable as a male or a female—nothing. Christ, a cat or dog, fine. No, but I'm being sarcastic.

[00:04:34.37]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Mary Cassatt or something like that, does she mean something special to you because there's more of an impression?

[00:04:40.92]

JOAN BROWN: No. No, she doesn't. I don't particularly like her things. They don't move me. I admire them and think they're very well—I think she was very, very good. But, as I was saying to you earlier, maybe when the tape was on or off, Manet doesn't interest me very much, either. I think he's very good. He's awfully good, but there's no craziness. And Mary Cassatt doesn't have that, either. And again, I cannot be abstract, or on principle, say, my God, I'm crazy about that because it's done by a female, and I'm a female.

[00:05:12.01]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: So you really—although you, I assume, would be sympathetic to the, quote, "struggle" of good people like Mimi Schapiro.

[00:05:24.26]

JOAN BROWN: Well, this is what I was going to get to. I think that the feminist movement is probably very important and a very good thing for a number of women, for some reasons—some interior and some exterior, as I said, times, people, what have you, but interior, too. I think I was lucky of just having, by nature, maybe because my background was kind of tough, of being, sort of a tough kid.

[00:05:53.74]

And maybe I grew up a little faster, in some ways, than other people, other kids did or what. I wasn't indoctrinated by role-playing within male and female. And maybe this has to do with part of my crazy background. I know I'm repeating myself, but I'm trying to make this clear how I feel about it. But yet, at the same time, I am sympathetic.

[00:06:16.34]

And I do see around me, as time has gone by, maybe, more of my female students than other people. But I see women who do feel this way and who have been caught in this role-

playing and have a hell of a time getting out of it and really needed this kind of push to say, "Yeah, okay, I can do it, too. I just don't have—what do you know? I just don't have to have ten kids or not get divorced, even though my husband and I hate each other, or that I can't go get a job," or what have you.

[00:06:49.73]

See, I never felt that way. And I don't know why, but I didn't. I never felt that way. I always felt—it never occurred to me that I even felt equal. But obviously [laughs], I did. Maybe just the difference was in the plumbing or something. But we all felt and struggled with the same hopes and failures and stuff like that. And I still don't. I don't feel, really, all that different than—I just feel a part of the human race. But I know a lot of women do. And I think, in that sense, this has been good. And I guess, to get off the dime, or get off your butts, or get going, or what have you. I don't mean that crappy, but that they do need goals—I mean, they do need other women as examples.

[00:07:39.63]

And I've heard—maybe it was Miriam who said, or someone said that they would look, as a young girl, a teenage girl when she first got into art—look and be very struck by the same things I'm struck by—Rembrandt, Goya, Velázquez, look at these and think, these are done by men. Gee, I wish women had done these and that they would have been more turned off if they could have had these same kind of kicks in the ass, art-wise.

[00:08:03.30]

And I never felt that way. I never thought, jeez—these were people to me. And if people say, "Are you a feminist?" I say, "No, I'm a humanist, hopefully." Or, at least, this is something I'd like to be that transcends either male or female. It doesn't make me better than. I don't mean to say that. It's just that I'm on a different wavelength in regard to art.

[00:08:26.30]

Now, I've seen unfairness in other senses. I've seen it in this whole swimming—and I'm getting my swimming, two cents worth of swimming in here. And I've seen it there. And oh, I've felt it, I guess, to some degree or another. But, to me, that kind of sexism is more of a real issue at this point in my life than anything I could now experience, or have experienced, within the art area. And that should be changed.

[00:08:56.94]

And yes, I don't just—I'm not oblivious to injustice. It's just that I haven't seen it. And so, yeah, I think the women's rights is a good thing. And women have come up to me—and I've been very surprised and very touched—and said, "Gee, your going along all these years has meant a great deal to me." And also, too, I wonder, how could you be married and have a child, and things like that, although that doesn't happen very, very often. But anyway, I don't know what else to say.

[00:09:33.52]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: I think that that's—I think you've made yourself very clear.

[00:09:37.52]

JOAN BROWN: Oh, I know—about the imagery.

[00:09:40.25]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, that was the second part of it. What about the—

[00:09:44.29]

JOAN BROWN: Imagery?

[00:09:44.74]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: —thinking in terms of, say, Judy Chicago. And I guess, in New York, this

is now almost a whole school of painting, the female imagery, meaning vaginal imagery. I don't know what one can say about it, really. Obviously, it's an extension of a feminist consciousness.

[00:10:02.15]

JOAN BROWN: I think it's a goddamn fraud. I can't stand it. I think it's very, very self-conscious and a totally exterior motivation for working. But again, I will say that if this is a help, either to these women themselves—I was going to say "people"—either to these women themselves or to younger women, to students up and coming, students coming along, either thinking of or involved in beginning as an artist—if this is helpful to them to recognize and deal with their own identity, and their identity in relation to the world around them—to men, to other people—if this is helpful to them in recognizing and feeling and dealing with, great.

[00:10:51.36]

But objectively, I think it stinks. I think it's absolutely contrived, as contrived and as stupid as people who come to this area, or people here, trying on purpose to make funky, West Coast, dumb art. Or, too—I've thought about this, and maybe this is a little nasty to say, and maybe I'm going a little far-fetched on it—but that to purposefully and consciously work with the pinks and the pastel colors one thinks is identified with a female, or with the vaginal cunt shades, whatever you want to call it, is really finding one's own identity, to me, that's absolutely as silly as bleaching your hair blonde and putting on a bouffant and being very proud that you never wear pants, that you wear dresses and rhinestone sets, and "I am a feminine creature." And it's all the trappings. And there's nothing—there's no essence. There's nothing past the trappings.

[00:11:53.96]

Because as people, in terms of imagery, we constantly use what is called—and who calls it, Freud? Who the hell calls the shots on this kind of imagery? That's a whole 'nother question—or color, or what is categorized and identified as. And there is as to anything, there's always another side of the coin. There's always an argument. My husband's favorite subject matter is roses, baby roses, especially pink baby roses. And maybe for him, that's a sexual shot. I asked him that the other day.

[00:12:25.29]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: I hope not. [Joan laughs.] Female infants—no, no.

[00:12:32.27]

JOAN BROWN: Who knows? And who cares, really? But here's somebody who's, Christ, what's Gordon, about 6'2", and he weighs over 200 pounds. And he's a big moose. And he just loves doing this delicate thing, female vagina things all the time. And—

[00:12:52.67]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Georgia O'Keeffe images.

[00:12:53.87]

JOAN BROWN: And hell, I use much, much male imagery. And some of the earlier paintings that, although non-objective, had real phallic shapes to them. So what, is somebody, some damn psychologist or psychiatrist going to get in there and say, "Oh, well, yes, that's her animus, the male side, and that's his anima, the female side." And you know, have a problem there, and all that. You know, it doesn't matter. But I don't think that exists, and it only exists on a conscious basis. And I don't find Georgia O'Keeffe's things that overtly female in the same terms that these people are talking about. I think they go way past that. Jeez, if I was her, I'd be damn pissed off if that's all—

[00:13:40.25]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: She probably is.

[00:13:41.06]

JOAN BROWN: —people were reading into my thing. Well, they must be. Because who was it that told me—I think it was Mary, told me that Judy Chicago really blasted Georgia O'Keeffe. I guess she'd made some contact or communication. And again, said, "Well, this woman just refuses to admit. This has not risen to her—"

[00:13:59.18]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Feminine consciousness, or something?

[00:14:00.30]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah, right, something like that. I'm not quoting that exactly as it was, because I can't remember it. But hell, I can't buy that, only that in terms if it helps people get more—helps women—get more in touch with themselves and, therefore, better able to cope with, and put out what's going on.

[00:14:26.36]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: But I gather, then, that you view it, perhaps, as, well, almost as an ambush of artistic direction.

[00:14:39.90]

JOAN BROWN: Yes. Oh, yeah.

[00:14:40.31]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: What I'm saying is that it's becoming involved with a side issue—

[00:14:43.87]

JOAN BROWN: Right.

[00:14:44.14]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: —and that in a way, in most cases, it could be a disadvantage, or it could hold one back from—it has less to do with art than with sociology.

[00:14:56.08]

JOAN BROWN: I think, in a lot of cases—right. In a lot of cases, it is holding people back. Or it's a compensation for either not having enough there in the first place or not allowing enough to come out, as I would say in Judy Chicago's case. I think her paintings are rotten. And I've always disliked her art. I've known her art since—because we were around the same time, in the '50s. And here I am, one side of the coin to tell. And she has the other.

[00:15:25.51]

And where was it that I read recently—maybe it wasn't her, but it was someone—who came from the same time. We were showing in L.A. at the same time. And she said it was then that she realized that no woman could ever show in the Ferus Gallery or those galleries on La Cienega. And this was an absolute statement of hers. Oh, it's in a woman's magazine that Miriam Schapiro did, which I just got a few weeks ago. And that bugged me. Because, hell, I was in group shows at the Ferus show. I was showing on La Cienega.

[00:16:00.37]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Sonia Gechtoff was.

[00:16:01.39]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah. So was Jay.

[00:16:02.65]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: So was Jay, right—in fact, part of the stable, so to speak.

[00:16:06.62]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah. And so some of this stuff makes you wonder about, oh, crud. It's just a goddamn compensation, all of a sudden, now because you're a woman. Well, the Black—the same thing happens with all that third world stuff, too, which part of it is a bunch of crap. And it depends on whose ox is getting gored, as they say.

[00:16:28.04]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: [Laughs].

[Recorder stops; restarts.]

End of July 15 interview.

[Recorder stops.] [Pause.] [Recorder restarts.]

[00:18:17.83]

The third interview with Joan Brown, September 9, 1975.

[00:18:24.50]

JOAN BROWN: [Laughs.] You think?

[00:18:26.57]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: I think. Picking up, hopefully, where we left off on July 15. There's still a number of points that I'd like to touch on, but I don't think we'll get to them all. What I'd like to do today is discuss and investigate a little bit, your imagery—actually, the painting itself, the imagery involved and, maybe, some of the changes to your evolution as an artist, specifically focusing on the role that your own experience, your life experience, plays in the imagery that you choose, in the final look of your painting.

[00:19:18.36]

I suppose you would have something general to say about that, but maybe the best way to get at it is to talk about a recent, rather traumatic experience that seemed to have, then, direct—not just reflection in your work; it provided the material, the experience, the incident, from pain, some recent pains.

[00:19:41.65]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah, Okay. I'd like to say, and this might as well go on tape, that it's hard for me to talk today, and the reason for that being that I haven't done any talking in a period of time. I've just been—I've sort of set this time limit for myself to do these paintings in, because I have an opportunity to show them.

[00:20:03.91]

And the subject matter which you refer to, the Alcatraz swim, is a very potent type of image for me at this particular time. And so the opportunity to show these, and also wanting to get this out in the form of my experiences with that damn swim have put me in kind of a funny frame of mind, where I have spent most of my time for the last couple of weeks, aside from my family—my husband and my child—by myself, in this room, mainly.

[00:20:37.72]

And so I haven't, other than on an abstract basis—like shopping, or something like that—I haven't really communicated with anyone. And I feel funny. It's hard to get my head back into a verbalization and, also, a relating to someone else. And I feel that I'm pulling to be able to do this. I'm somewhere else right now.

[00:20:57.91]

And I suspect, once I start shooting my mouth off and thinking, letting these ideas become words, rather than visual images, that I'll be able to relate to what I'm doing. So if I sound a little vague, or drift off or things, it's because of that, where my head's at at this time. I better shape up fast because I'm going back to work in about three weeks, too. And there's a

lot of extending out.

[00:21:26.77]

But anyway, we're talking about the type of imagery that I use. I paint from personal experiences. This has always been so. When I was younger and very much involved in the literalness of Abstract Expressionism, a lot of times I think subject matter was a bit obscured by the kind of technique that I was using, which felt right for the time—no put-down. I don't mean to say I was on a bum kick or sidetracking on a wrong track, doing that. It fit. It was fine for that period of time.

[00:22:04.87]

But as the years have gone by, I think it took a turning point in about 1965. As the years have gone by, I want more of a clarity, of a simplification, especially in dealing with figures. And around three years ago, I remember really articulating—bitching, is what, articulating nothing—bitching and whining on and on—to Gordon—because he works, too. We have that common interest, at the end of the day—complain to someone who's more or less involved in the same type of thing—and saying I really felt very frustrated because I wanted to do, I like to do, portraits, figures, people better than anything else. I really like doing it. But I wanted to do it in a new way.

[00:22:49.62]

Obviously, Gordon said, "What the hell way do you want to do it?" "I don't know. I won't know until I see it." But I had this need to paint people and paint things in general, in a new way. Well, okay, a period of time has passed. Three years, finally, now it's coming into focus. And it's a very pleasing and very thrilling and rather scary situation. Because it's starting to take form.

[00:23:15.13]

I'm getting rid of a lot of the excess baggage, a lot of old ideas of what works, what doesn't, what art is, a lot of what I tell other people to do in teaching, discarding, throwing out the window, and, for me, getting down to painting the things clearly that are important to me, which are usually incidences—either symbolically or literally—that have happened in my own life, and experiences, and doing it without all the excess baggage, without the trappings of fancy paintwork, the this and that—not to say there isn't a response to the materials. Because if there wasn't, I wouldn't use—I'd use acrylic. There's a definite response and tactile thing, both in terms of actually painting these things, of dealing with it, and also looking at them, responding to them.

[00:24:07.41]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: And you're almost exclusively using enamel.

[00:24:09.70]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah, right, which is a very sensual medium. Medium is important. I mean, the medium that I'm using is very important to me. And I've used time and time again, the example of I can draw with pen and ink. I can get the images. I can get them in proportion, this and that. But it's dead. I have no response. There's no sensuosity between the material and myself with pen and ink. But a pencil, there's plenty. I even found it recently with magic markers. I've had a lot of fun using those—terrible. I like them. They give you a nice—there's speed.

[00:24:43.65]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: You and Bill Wiley.

[00:24:44.52]

JOAN BROWN: Does he use those, too? I don't know. There's a speed.

[00:24:47.13]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, flares.

[00:24:47.46]

JOAN BROWN: There's a speed to them that I require in my work. There's a speed to enamel. You don't have to mix anything. It's right there. You have it right there. And if you're particularly impatient, it's a great medium. You don't have to add oil. You don't have to add thinner. It's just, dip your brush in, and put it on. And it's right there. And you can take it off if you don't like it. But nevertheless, it's sensual. I like the look. I like the smell. It's a sensual response to the material. So, yes, that is important. I don't mean to say I'm just doing the imagery, and that's all I care about.

[00:25:18.97]

No. I like the two things to go hand in hand. I like myself and the viewer to be brought back to the fact that this, after all, this is only paint on canvas, folks, aside from the other things that go on. But getting back to the subject matter, I just wanted to say all that junk I just said so that it doesn't sound like the subject matter is the most important thing. Because it isn't. It's part of it. But these experiences do play a very important role.

[00:25:53.87]

They don't always work. Sometimes I just paint pictures of the experience that I saw. And at the time, I experience it, the actual thing itself. I might be very moved, and all this and that, and come back with these hot ideas and desires and feelings to portray this on a canvas, to put it into form as a painter. And it doesn't always work.

[00:26:16.01]

An example of that is, which turned into one of the Alcatraz paintings, is when we were down in Santa Cruz a few weeks ago—hell, a few weeks ago, nothing, what, six weeks ago, a month ago—for that swim. The boardwalk down there is beautiful. And it's like going back, maybe twenty years ago. And it's very peaceful. It's not a violent situation at all, not like it is in the city here, kind of '40s, '50s feeling to it. And they had a wonderful carousel, which I've always loved. And I stood there for about twenty minutes, watching the people on the carousel. And they had the ring, the big, gold ring that you pull, you reach for. And you pull the ring, and then you're supposed to throw it into the clown's mouth.

[00:26:55.51]

And God, I watched that for a long time. And I had it all down. In my head, I painted the picture. So when I came back, I started painting it. And I worked on that damn thing for two weeks. I could never breathe any life into it. I could paint. I could balance it all. I know what to do in terms of color and composition, all that stuff. And I completed the painting. And it was as dead as hell. It had no presence to it. So I painted over it. But it was a complete painting.

[00:27:24.17]

So I don't know what it is that breathes the life into some of these paintings. All of a sudden, there's presence. There's life forming in the situation. So I'm trying to distinguish between just going ahead, feeling something strong, which I did feel. It wasn't just a visual experience. Also, it was very symbolic, trying to grab that ring and throw it, reaching for the ideals, all this kind of corny stuff attached to it. And I was very moved by this. And I couldn't breathe any of this, this vitality, this life, into the—it was just a picture. It didn't exist. It was a good picture. If one were to critique it or tear it apart in pictorial terms, this is balanced and blah, blah, blah.

[00:28:10.48]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: But it didn't satisfy you.

[00:28:12.07]

JOAN BROWN: It didn't have any life to it! The horses were done very nicely. And it had all the mirrored—there was a child—all those wonderful mirrored pieces you look up to in paintings around the carousel. There's usually an Indian with a bow and arrow. There's an elk and a deer, or a deer drinking out of a stream where the poles come down. There's all

those pictures. I had a lot of fun doing those. But it didn't make it. So out it went—didn't have any life. Why it didn't, I don't know. I certainly felt strongly about it. But this Alcatraz thing which I've had this hideous experience on, this swim—not so hideous, just very moving, really shook up not just my physical being, but my psyche and my soul and my emotional being and my spirit.

[00:29:02.69]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Why don't you just briefly say what it was? This was, what, three weeks ago or longer?

[00:29:11.72]

JOAN BROWN: It'll be, I think, three weeks this Saturday. God, I forget the date. It seems like it was yesterday, and it seems like it was about a year ago, too. It's one of those funny kind of things. But myself and twenty-two other women tried to swim from Alcatraz into San Francisco. And fourteen got—no, nine got pulled out, and fourteen made it. And every one of us, including—it took longer than it's ever been recorded for one of these—or that we know of—to be recorded for one of these swims to be swum. And some of these people were very expert swimmers who not only got pulled out, but completed the swim, as fast as any of the guys are, or faster, who do this.

[00:29:58.99]

But we hit what one of the men who knows that Bay, that body of water, referred to as a freaky body of water, which just happened that day, where it's unpredictable, where, all of a sudden, there's some weird back eddy or some crazy thing going on like that. And we were told—this is what we—I trained for the swim two weeks ahead of time, stayed in the water for an hour.

[00:30:23.18]

We were told it would take the faster swimmers—there were six groups of swimmers, according to speed. I was in the third group. The first group was fastest, second next, third next, and fourth, fifth, sixth. There were six groups with four in each one. Well, one, I guess the last one, had three because there were 23 swimmers. So we went off at two-minute intervals. Gun—they shoot a gun with blanks. You dive off the boat. We went out on boats. We swam from the east side—I mean, we jumped off the east side of Alcatraz.

[00:30:57.28]

And going out, the water looked okay. We were on the boat, these cruisers. The water looked all right. It didn't look rough. But we were told it would take the fastest swimmers about 40 minutes, the slowest swimmers, one hour, and the middle swimmers, which group I was in, about 50 minutes. So we all—we had trained. We all prepared for staying in the water that long.

[00:31:20.78]

We were told the first five minutes of water was very rough. We were prepared for that—big waves, swells—and then it would smooth out. And Jesus, what misinformation that was. And we were told to head east at a diagonal towards the Ferry Building. We would pick up three-quarters of the way this current. We went on the end of a flood, and we'd pick up the beginning of an ebb, that's right—which would bring us into the opening, Aquatic Park, which we wanted to head to.

[00:31:49.63]

So we were tense, and all this and that, but we were optimistic. And we had all the pictures taken beforehand and all this and that. So we dive off the boat. It's fine. It's rough, five minutes. Okay, fine. It gets worse. It never gets better. It got worse. And there was this tremendous—we all spread out. The guy also had us all in one [inaudible] on the buddy system. We're not racing. We're all four staying together in a row, lined up horizontally [laughs], all this crazy kind of stuff, which just doesn't exist in a situation like this. So we were spread out all over the place.

[00:32:29.06]

The pilots were told to take us, the pilots meaning the guys in rowboats, were to take us on this course heading for the Ferry Building. We were to follow our pilot boats. They called shots on us. So the pilots, who realized that something weird was going on in this water, took a different course. And the ones who were trying to do the right thing, follow instructions, took the tricky course. So we all got lost, lost each other in this water.

[00:33:01.49]

I knew one person was back behind me. I couldn't have stopped if I wanted to. The water was so rough, and going back to her, it was just too rough, too crazy. I was being bounced around. So was she. I tried to head back that way. By the time I got there, she would have been off somewhere else. So there was no such thing as staying together. So you're isolated. And this is a real literal situation of isolation. We all feel it, experience it on a somewhat day-to-day basis. But here, you really are. You're out in the middle of the goddamn ocean. And you're isolated.

[00:33:32.85]

And San Francisco Bay is a rough damn body of water, especially there. I can see why they picked that, and put that prison on. And it scares the hell out of anyone, not that it can't be swum. It can, has been, many, many times. And under proper circumstances, it still can be. But it is one hell of a scary body of water. So we didn't just encounter swells, but we encountered these huge, giant waves. And this goddamn freighter went by in the middle of all this swim because the Coast Guard screwed up somehow, scared everybody to death, and made even bigger waves.

[00:34:03.67]

And I remember, first of all, the feeling—I was never afraid of drowning. I was very aware that I could die right out here. But that didn't—not that I have any death wishes or anything, but that wasn't the fear at all. The fear was this real sense of isolation. And the physical discomfort was feeling seasick, more than anything else, just feeling unbelievably nauseated and seasick. Just—I've never felt that way in my life. I don't get seasick on boats, and I don't get sick very often, either. But that was very unexpected.

[00:34:39.49]

The main reason it happened was swallowing all that water. Every time, I took a mouthful. The wave broke over me, no matter which way I was breathing, and I swallowed the water. I didn't have a chance to spit it out or nothing. It was too violent. So I just swallowed tons of water. So as I was rocking in these swells back and forth, tossed around, I got sicker and sicker and sicker. And that was the feeling of discomfort.

[00:35:01.63]

Then the hallucinating setting in, where you think you see things that aren't there. And you think you see boats. That's the usual. I talked to other swimmers afterwards, and that's what people kept thinking. They were seeing boats, running into boats. Maybe that's wishful thinking. [Laughs.] You want to get out. Here's the boat coming to get you that isn't there and all this and that and seeing the city still so small and so far away, all the city, the skyline, that I love so much, that I paint over and over again during more optimistic [laughs] moments, that I really relate to, and really see, looked so foreign and so far away and like I would never—which I didn't—never get over there, never land on that particular piece of land again.

[00:35:52.29]

It looked foreign. There's the pyramid [Transamerica Building –Ed.]. There's Coit Tower. There's the Bay Bridge. There's the Bank of America building and all this. And I do happen to like our skyline. I think they're very beautiful. And it was unfriendly. And I was way far away. Anyway, it scared the hell out of me, although I didn't realize it at the time. I wasn't so frightened at the time. It was afterwards that it made such an impact. And I didn't want to get out. I wanted to keep trying. I wanted to make that swim, dammit, all odds against me. I knew they were working against me. And I was still determined to make the swim.

[00:36:26.39]

Finally, a water pilot got on board with the fins and stuff, some big moose that can stay in the water for ages. He comes, spots me. And he comes over, and he says, "Are you in trouble?" And I said, "No, I'm not. I'm just doing fine, thanks. How far are we?" He says, about a quarter of a mile from the opening. I said, "Fine, I can make that." He said, "Let's see you swim." And as it turned out, I was swimming in circles. I wasn't worth a damn. I was just out of it, just gone. The cold, the feeling sick to my stomach, being in the water.

[00:36:57.79]

Oh, he said, "You've been in the water an hour and a half," which I wouldn't have believed. I didn't believe him. But if someone had asked me how long that I'd been in, I would have said twenty minutes, at the most. You lose all track of everything. And when I heard that, I thought, Jesus, that's a hell of a long time. So I realized why I was hallucinating. And I never really felt cold. I obviously was, because when they pulled me out, apparently I was stiff as a board, according to everybody—absolutely paralyzed, like a piece of petrified wood, stiff, being hauled out, [laughs] like that. So obviously, I was frozen inside out.

[00:37:31.90]

But that's the problem with being in that water length of time. You're so out of it, you don't even feel cold—nothing. You're just gone. You don't feel your feet, your hands, nothing. The water was so damn rough and so terrifying that I never even started, which I usually do, to feel my feet get cold and then my hands. Because lots of times, you swim, and it's cold. And your hands are just wide spread. They're like you couldn't possibly get your fingers together. They're just all deformed, and you're trying to swim like that. And you know it. And you try to get the fingers together, and you can't. But out there, that never entered my consciousness that that was going on. But obviously, it was.

[00:38:07.40]

So he pulled me—so they pulled me out. And then I conked out. I don't remember anything until maybe ten minutes later on a boat, on a big cruiser. I'd been transferred to another boat, which I don't remember, and then to a third boat, on that cruiser and was very glad to see three of the other women swimmers, especially two real fast ones [laughs] on there. I didn't feel like I'd really failed this damn swim. It meant a lot to me. And I got sick as hell on the boat and threw up all that salt water, all that stuff. I couldn't even drink. I was so cold. They tried to give me coffee with brandy or whiskey, and I couldn't touch a thing because I was so damn sick, which was very unusual.

[00:38:51.40]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, what was—obviously, it was an unusual and, I suppose, terrifying experience, in some ways—

[00:39:00.18]

JOAN BROWN: To say the least.

[00:39:01.15]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: —something that then you had a reaction to it. It wasn't something that just went away, and you came home, and then that was over.

[00:39:08.41]

JOAN BROWN: I drove up with Gordon. We drove up to Santa Rosa and picked Noel up from camp. And I had to get back down to reality. I hadn't seen Noel for two weeks. His birthday was the following week, his thirteenth birthday. That's a big deal. So I had to pull myself together and do all the things I had to do. But I felt quite crazy that week. I was very, very tired, extremely tired. So were the other women I talked to. Everyone was very moved by that swim and very, very upset. And it was quite a spiritual, kind of religious type of experience in many ways and, in a sense, a kind of a gift in a far-out sense, an experience that you really don't get to experience that often. I'm not saying I'd want to do it again at all. And I'm not saying I even would have done it—maybe I would have—if I'd known what it had

been like.

[00:39:59.11]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, how has the experience, then, transformed into art, to put it in a very [inaudible] way?

[00:40:05.09]

JOAN BROWN: Well, I just had to get this damn thing out of my system. And other people get it out different ways. Like, I was very touched after the swim. Many of the women were crying because they were upset by this. This was a weird experience. And they were sorry they all didn't make it, or they had such a terrible time making—some people came crawling in on the beach who did. Even these great big, heavy, hefty gals who made the swim just came in devastated. And so people were crying. And I don't react that way, which, I guess, maybe, sometimes bothers me.

[00:40:43.39]

I saw all this going on. I felt very strongly. But I don't know. Somehow, I guess, maybe I don't respond that way. But I knew something was going on, and I was going to get all this crap out my own way, all my feelings about this awe and fear and dismay and all this stuff. So I knew I was going to paint this. And it might be something that I paint on and off over a period of time that enters in, a new kind of imagery that enters in, as I've done a lot of—as dogs, obviously, mean a great deal to me on many different levels. This kind of experience may keep reoccurring on and off over the years. I don't know.

[00:41:26.50]

I know I'm currently working—I'm starting another one. I did two paintings and two drawings that incorporate this, and working on a third painting. And I don't have it—I don't know what else will come after that. Maybe it will again, and maybe it won't. And it might just pop in on and off over the next couple years, or forever. I don't know. I don't know.

[00:41:53.82]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: All of the paintings that you've done, or all the work that you've done since the swim, involves—

[00:41:59.03]

JOAN BROWN: Have all, every single one.

[00:42:00.51]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: —this experience during the Alcatraz swim. And it usually takes the form of—

[00:42:05.39]

JOAN BROWN: A picture.

[00:42:05.87]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: A [inaudible] made up of a picture of, one would imagine, there's a swimmer, a female figure, swimming in very rough water with either Alcatraz in the background—

[00:42:17.03]

JOAN BROWN: Or the city, depending on—

[00:42:17.60]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: —or the city, depending which way—

[00:42:19.94]

JOAN BROWN: You're looking.

[00:42:20.45]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: —one is looking. And then, in addition, well, in the ones I've seen, it seems, usually, there's a single figure—

[00:42:32.06]

JOAN BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, in the new painting, there will be more.

[00:42:34.48]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: —or two.

[00:42:34.91]

JOAN BROWN: No, but in the one I'm going to do, it's a bigger area. And they're going to be a lot of them.

[00:42:39.77]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: And this, it seems to me—what I'm thinking of is the pictures, the paintings, in the current show at the Charles Campbell Gallery. Many of the paintings there, they're not dealing with this, with the Alcatraz experience, but they involve single figures. Well, this is something, maybe, we can talk about a little more. But you seem to, at least in the recent work, be dealing with this theme of isolation, of a single figure in an interior. Is this a fair evaluation? Or do you do agree with this, that this, to a large extent, might be the subject matter of the paintings?

[00:43:29.02]

JOAN BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative], sure. Yeah, I agree with that. I like this duality, not just visually, but emotionally. I love the play, the mystery, between the figure, usually involved in a rather placid kind of setting, and then something else going on. It can take the place of that dog standing on its hind legs on a towel, which is out of context, which is a weird type of thing. Or it can just be the picture, with that damn violent Alcatraz swim. But I like this duality, the two things going on. And you don't know whether the figure's actually thinking about these, or that's just going on, and she's thinking about something else, or what. I don't know. [Laughs.] I don't have the answers. If I did, I wouldn't do it.

[00:44:15.43]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: At any rate, these very strong—these experiences, whether it be an Alcatraz swim or something else, those experiences that for one reason or another, are strong enough to leave an impression, often do appear as the subject matter in your work.

[00:44:34.16]

JOAN BROWN: Often do, yeah. They don't always work out, as I explained. That Santa Cruz carousel thing didn't. But very often, they do. For instance, when my child was born, I did him over and over and over again. And I'm getting ready to do him again one of these days because he's just reaching puberty. And I've gotta do him at this age. [Laughs.]

[00:44:53.42]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Was there an under—this is, perhaps, a difficult question to answer—but is there an underlying philosophy—I can't think of another word at this moment—that accounts for the use—and this, I think, has been pretty standard throughout your career—the use of personal imagery, images drawn from your own life, whether it be your child, or [inaudible].

[00:45:23.35]

JOAN BROWN: No, they just fit. That's my best way to put into form these more literal kind of images. The same thing that I'm doing has been done over and over again. Morandi did it over and over and over again with the damn same set of bottles. Christ, you look at those

things—not that he's one of my favorite artists. I admire him, but he just occurs to me. He would do etchings or paintings of the same damn bottles before the war, when they were much more flamboyant and lighthearted and all this. God, and then he does the same ones. And they just have this black, moody feeling, his reaction during the war. No, the subject matter is only a vehicle.

[00:46:06.87]

Mine just happens to be a little more obvious, maybe, than someone else's, which, for me, fits better. That's the kind of imagery I want to use. But no, it's a subject matter. It's just a vehicle. I mentioned one of these other tapes, I think about Albers, the squares, which I've been very moved by emotionally. I'm not—needn't talk about the intellectual part of that now. But emotionally, been taken places, taken back. And hopefully, we find the kind of imagery that fits us and then use that as a vehicle to express, to put forth, all these things that go on in our heads and hearts and guts and everyplace else.

[00:46:54.26]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: How does your style relate to the content? Your style—anybody listening to this tape would know this, I'm sure—but is extremely simplified. It seems to go back and forth. I can think of some things, say, a few years ago that were even more abstracted, more simplified, than, say, your current work.

[00:47:20.81]

JOAN BROWN: I disagree with that.

[00:47:21.89]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: You do?

[00:47:22.40]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah.

[00:47:22.70]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Okay, well, good. Let's—

[00:47:24.65]

JOAN BROWN: Not so much on a literal basis. I have more imagery working. And I've been after this for a while, to be able to paint a lot of things. Like, I'm very proud of that fireplace I did in one of those Alcatraz paintings. Because doing a fireplace with fire is a very complex subject. And I've done it in the past, years ago, when I was working with oil paint and a palette knife, big brushes, and, God, just laying it on and on and trying to blend in the colors. And this was done very, very graphically, almost cartoon-like, very simply. I'm very proud.

[00:47:53.10]

And again, this gets back to what I started out with talking earlier in this tape of really aiming for, really wanting, so obviously, so strongly, in the past three years or so, to be able to paint anything I want to paint as simply and directly as possible. And so I feel the paintings are getting simpler. There's more imagery in them—paintings, drawings—but they're done more simply than I've ever been able to do them. Now, the literalness would be where they would appear more simple, just the room with the lines, which were the basic, the start, which I needed in order to fill and put things in. Obviously, those are more simple but not in the kind of framework that I'm thinking in or operating in.

[00:48:44.70]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, what about something like "The Lovers," that series, or "The Swimmers?" I'm just thinking, visualizing, some of the paintings. What about '73, a couple years ago—

[00:48:56.04]

JOAN BROWN: Right. Yeah.

[00:48:56.40]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: —which seemed to be so abstracted that it's—

[00:48:59.05]

JOAN BROWN: The silhouette, right. Well, I was getting—that was a period of time I was going through where I really was sick of the old way I was handling figures and really, really looking for another way. And I had to wipe them out to do that, find another way. And now, to me, it all fits and makes sense. Maybe I'm all wrong. I don't know. I don't care. [Laughs.]

[00:49:18.36]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Because you feel, in a way, the current work is even more simplified?

[00:49:25.28]

JOAN BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:49:26.10]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Okay. I don't know if I asked you this earlier, but it ties in. We're talking about style. Was there some point that you consciously adopted what has now continued to be a very simplified style, a very natural—

[00:49:51.80]

JOAN BROWN: No, not that I can think. It's been very hard to come by. It hasn't been natural at all. I've really sweated. I've really worried about—God, I remember last summer. I was very, very worried about what I was doing. Because the paintings were just like pulling teeth. They were "The Acrobats." And they came out pretty good. Some were crappy.

They were very important, and, obviously a transition, and got me to where I want to be, which is right now. But Jesus, that was like pulling teeth. God, I'd be so exhausted after painting. And just weeks would go by, and nothing. I just couldn't dig up any image, really. I'd start with something, and something else would happen. And just—oh, it was just awful, the kind of thing that makes you really want to give up painting. [Laughs.] It was really tough for about five, six months, just, ugh.

[00:50:35.83]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: What about the human figure? The human figure appears in, seems to me, most of your work, although, of course, there are the animal paintings, and so forth. How do you see your relationship to, specifically here, the human figure as a model? Maybe that's not putting it—

[00:51:01.60]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah, quite to the point.

[00:51:02.68]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: —quite clearly enough. Well, what does it mean in the context of your work? Very often, you work from photographs. I know that. In fact, would it be fair to say that's the usual practice?

[00:51:16.63]

JOAN BROWN: Mm-mm [negative].

[00:51:17.29]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: You do work from the actual model.

[00:51:19.76]

JOAN BROWN: Mm-mm [negative]. Not very often, no.

[00:51:25.36]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: What does the figure mean to you in the context of your work? It's certainly not a formal exercise. This is why I—

[00:51:35.77]

JOAN BROWN: No. [Laughs.] Hardly, no.

[00:51:39.13]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: And very often, your figures are women. And you admit that they could be, and often are, self-portraits.

[00:51:47.26]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah. Well, often, it's unconscious. But I'm aware of it, either while I'm doing it, or afterwards. [Inaudible] it's not. Well, again, it's—I repeat myself, what I was saying a few minutes ago—that, for me, the kind of imagery of the figure, the literal figure, the woman, is the most comfortable way, and exciting way, for me to get across, as it would be for someone else to do it with—maybe Gordon or someone—to do it with this coffee cup. But feelings I have about myself and about the world, and—

[00:52:27.68]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: But when you do something like the painting—maybe there's more than one—of your swimming coach, of Charlie, obviously, you're saying something, again, about your own interests, your own passions, your passion for swimming, and a special admiration for him. So these images, my point is, carry, at least for you, a special impact—

[00:52:49.04]

JOAN BROWN: Meaning.

[00:52:49.37]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: —a special meaning, related, again, to your life experience.

[00:52:53.55]

JOAN BROWN: I can't answer that clearly like I would like to. Because I don't know, not because I can't put it into words. I don't know the answer to that. I know I have to feel presence from the figure. And sometimes it's kind of weird, like the painting I just finished, where there's the Alcatraz swim in the picture, the guy in the rowboat helping the woman out, and then the figure off on the right. There's a dog on the left and a figure off in the right-hand corner. That figure has a lot of presence to me. And while I was working next to it, I kind of got spooked out by it. [Laughs.] It was sort of like a real person. And also, too, lately, I've found if I don't like the figure—I'll do the figures a whole bunch of times.

[00:53:35.56]

And no, they usually aren't done from—on the whole, they're not done from photographs, not that I have anything against working from photographs. Sometimes I start out that way, but they don't turn into it. All these new women are totally imaginary. They're not from mirrors, nothing. They're just out of my head. And I'll go through a whole bunch of different personalities and different outfits, stuff like that. But if I don't like the person, I can't do the painting, I can't get the rest. I have to like the person. [Laughs.]

[00:53:59.41]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: I think that's what one of the things I was trying to get at. Well, then, it's rare for you to use studies from the actual model.

[00:54:07.71]

JOAN BROWN: Oh, yes.

[00:54:08.04]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Very rare, although you do for practice, or whatever.

[00:54:13.37]

JOAN BROWN: Not anymore. I haven't done that recently.

[00:54:14.44]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, you did for a—

[00:54:15.00]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah, and I'll do it again, I'm sure. Yeah.

[00:54:17.07]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: But this is—you don't do that. You don't draw from the model, from the figure, with the idea of using this, then, as an image in your painting?

[00:54:25.27]

JOAN BROWN: Oh, no, mm-mm [negative]. No. Mainly, I like to draw from the model to store up information in my head about what goes on with the figure.

[00:54:33.32]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: And then you draw on that later on?

[00:54:35.27]

JOAN BROWN: Right. Then I can get any kind of pose I want, although they all end up being standing, fairly rigid poses. [Laughs.]

[00:54:43.91]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, let's talk just a moment, if we may, about your exhibition that's still at the Charles Campbell [Gallery in San Franscisco –Ed.]—

[00:54:53.32]

JOAN BROWN: 'Til Saturday.

[00:54:54.20]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Until Saturday, right. We looked at it together and talked about some of the works. And there were some things that occurred to me. It's a very strong show. And it's very much—it seems to hang together very well. There's a theme, although I don't want to articulate it, but there seems to be a theme. Visually, it works together. And, shall we say, emotionally, there's a similar feeling—

[00:55:25.49]

JOAN BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:55:25.73]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: —about many of the works. And again, it seems to have something to do with—well, perhaps with isolation. But there also seemed to be an element of exhibitionism, or self-exposure. [Joan laughs.] I remember we talked, and we used these terms while looking at a couple of the paintings, almost a sense of voyeurism.

[00:55:48.55]

JOAN BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:55:49.03]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: One work, I recall, there's a figure seated in—

[00:55:54.28]

JOAN BROWN: Semi-clothed.

[00:55:55.33]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Semi-clothed.

[00:55:56.14]

JOAN BROWN: With a mirror.

[00:55:56.98]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Right. And then there's a window, and as I recall, sort of a city scene outside.

[00:56:04.37]

JOAN BROWN: Right.

[00:56:05.20]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: And one way to view that, of course, is there's a possibility, the opportunity, for the outside world, or somebody outside, to look in on the personal life.

[00:56:17.47]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah. That is unconscious. If that's there, it's unconscious. But the more I've done these paintings, as I said earlier, I'm very intrigued by this duality of one thing going on here, and something else going on there, whether it's a painting from an Alcatraz swim and a woman. I wouldn't be content just to do the Alcatraz swim, or just to do the scene outside that window. That wouldn't interest me. I like this play, and, sure, voyeurism or whatever it may it turn to. I don't know.

[00:56:48.47]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, if, in fact, the woman—

[00:56:50.06]

JOAN BROWN: They're very intimate paintings, I feel.

[00:56:52.25]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, in fact, you used the word—

[00:56:54.23]

JOAN BROWN: Sexual.

[00:56:54.44]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: —sexy, yeah. And I'm wondering if you could be more specific on that.

[00:56:59.34]

JOAN BROWN: I really can't account for that, other than that I think maybe they're more revealing than most of the paintings I've done—again, not in such a literal fashion as to subject matter of being nude or semi-clothed, or not nude, not in that sense, but more revealing in the extent that a lot of the excess baggage—again, my favorite cliché—is gone, where I'm not, and the viewer, obviously, can't be, either, distracted by a lot of fancy footwork with palette knives or brushes, a lot of stumbling over of not clearly defining the situation, making reference to it rather than just nailing it in there, that kind of exposure.

[00:57:46.21]

Adelie Bischoff, I think, hit the nail on the head. She said, as she often does—she said she told Charlie Campbell—she told me this, very apologetic—she said, "Joan, I hope you won't get mad at me, dislike me for this, she said, but I said something to Charlie. And I just don't want it to get back to you and you to misunderstand it." She said, after she saw the show, she said to Charlie Campbell, "Joan doesn't show us how crazy she is very often, does she?" [Laughs.] And I thought that that was very wise of Adelie to pick that up.

[00:58:22.91]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: But she felt that, in these paintings, you did?

[00:58:25.26]

JOAN BROWN: Yes! And this is what I mean by exposed, although it's unconscious and conscious and the crazy stuff that goes on in my head, or my own perception, which is really no crazier than anyone else. But it's more out front.

[00:58:36.71]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: But you do agree with her, then?

[00:58:37.98]

JOAN BROWN: Absolutely, yeah.

[00:58:39.06]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: And so this, then, is what you mean in terms of self-exposure, or self-revelation?

[00:58:45.51]

JOAN BROWN: That's what I mean, right. And that kind of—I might use the word sexual because we think of unpeeling, or whatever it is, as a sexual thing, which it is, too. So that's part of it. I think that's what I meant when I said that, although I'm not sure. I mean, I'm not trying to pin down what's going on in these paintings at all. If I knew, I wouldn't paint the goddamn things. There'd be no point to it. So I'm just spouting off, or pulling on a lot of, maybe, [inaudible] about the work. It's just that I feel very good about it.

[00:59:22.44]

This is a bad thing to say. I'm sure artists feel this way. I feel like—well, let me put it positively. Let me say I feel more focused on what I'm doing than I ever have, and that I'm reaching, hopefully—I hope, maybe this shooting in the dark—a point of maturity in my work where it is more to the point, more focused, more direct. And the bad part I was going to say is I feel like I've been screwing around for nineteen years, which was very necessary in order to get to where I'm going, not only where I'm going but where I am right now. And it's a very exciting kind of feeling.

[01:00:02.74]

And I think someone like Charlie Sava, the swim coach, has been a tremendous help in directing me to where the paintings are right now, in the sense that—all this was going through my mind when I met up with him. I wanted to see him about economy, about getting rid of all this stuff, extra stuff, about not getting right to the point as clearly and as simply and as hard, as uncompromising, as I wanted to. And Jesus, that's exactly what he teaches in swimming, is to not waste. And you don't go over off this way or that way, with your arms or with your feet, to breathe, whatever. Just get right down to the basics, which is one of the most difficult things to do in the world. It's so hard not to sidetrack.

[01:00:49.81]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: How do the skeletons, the skeleton drawings, fit into this, then?

[01:00:55.44]

JOAN BROWN: For a couple of—on a number of levels. I shouldn't say just a couple—a number of levels. One is, they're a very quick speed. I keep talking about speed. It's very necessary to me. God, if I have to screw around, which, again, for somebody else, is a marvelous way of self-expression, but not for me. Get right to the point. God, I can describe them—a figure. These are people to me. So what, they're skeletons. Again, just a vehicle that can capture, gesture, just like that. Now I don't have to put in the eyes and the nose and the fingers and all this stuff. I can just get the general gesture with this very quick routine that I've rigged up with three ribs [laughs], and all this and that—right to the point. I can get all kinds of gestures, just to get this life and this zip, this speed, into the gesture.

Because people's gestures absolutely fascinate me. I just love all the stuff that goes on, interacting and just everyone's individual kind of gesture. So I can do it that way very, very quickly. I can do it quickly, not have to worry about it. Therefore, I can do anything that comes into my head. And many of those paintings at the Campbell Gallery came from that, not so much directly, where I would take something out of there and then blow it up and put it in the painting. But I got a lot of ideas when I can work very quick like that.

[01:02:13.81]

I do the same thing with life drawing with the nude—many, many ideas. It stimulates me. I don't care if they end up in the garbage can. There's no—the product outcome is not important. The process is what's important. And so I say the skeleton is a good, quick way of getting these gestures and interaction that I want. And also, too, which I take literally, they are the skeletons.

They were the very basis coming from the—the old figures got abstracted, silhouetted, simplified into "The Swimmers," and, more so, into "The Acrobats." And then the skeleton comes out again. It's the basis. That's the basic structure. Now I'm building on the skeleton, giving flesh again to skeletons. But I will still use the skeleton from time to time in drawing for, as I say, this speed.

[01:03:07.52]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, you obviously, then, feel better about your work than you have for some time.

[01:03:14.14]

JOAN BROWN: Yes. [Laughs.]

[01:03:14.72]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: And that's—I wonder—and also, coincidentally perhaps, you're having, well, this show at the Campbell—of course, you had the show—

[01:03:24.30]

JOAN BROWN: Which I was very surprised was so well received. Jesus Christ. But it disappointed [laughs] [inaudible].

[01:03:30.68]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Two years ago, you had that big show, important show, at Berkeley, and then this show at the Charles Campbell Gallery. And now you're having one coming up soon at the Frumkin in Chicago. And this, of course, is after a period of a number of years where you were unaffiliated. You weren't affiliated with a gallery.

[END OF TRACK AAA_brown75_7968_m]

[00:00:03.02]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

[Recorder stops; restarts.]

September 9, 1975, the continuation of a third interview with Joan Brown.

[Recorder stops; restarts.]

The question has been posed.

[00:00:30.79]

JOAN BROWN: Okay, go ahead. Ask it again. Okay, no, that's okay. I can take off from that. So I was saying on the other tape that I'm pleased, I'm excited, but I feel more focused than I have for a long time. But again, that is—I want to make it very clear not to put down the other times—those dry spells are very important. Those times of transition are very, very, very important, and without those you don't get focused. And they'll happen again. I'm not saying, "A-ha, now I've arrived where I want to be." No, again, this is a transition, and continually, it's moving and growing. That's the excitement. That's the challenge, and there's up and downs.

[00:01:14.65]

You make the comment, which is interesting, and I hadn't thought of this, that the exterior elements of the picture, such as shows, reviews, interest—outside interest by other artists, people in general, is happening again, also simultaneously with my feelings about what I'm doing, which is interesting. It's coincidental, I'm sure. [Laughs.] The two do not go hand in hand, because I've had it both ways. In fact, when I stopped showing the Staempfli and really changed the way I was working, which was so necessary for me, I was really at a peak of getting a lot of feedback, financially as well as notoriety.

[00:01:59.27]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: That was, what, about '60—

[00:02:01.73]

JOAN BROWN: '65. Well, that whole year of '64, where I was getting ready to make that change. So the two don't go hand in hand. Other times, too, when I have felt very good about what I'm doing, there has been no one, nothing happening in terms of feedback, which is fine. So if that happens, it's good. If it doesn't, it's good also. It really doesn't—it's not that important to me. I'm not saying in general. Some people feel it is, and for them, it is. Nothing's one way. But anyway, this is happening. You use the word "accessible," which I think is an excellent word. I wouldn't have thought of that. It's a nice word, that I'm more accessible than I've been in a long time. That's a—yes, as long as I can call the shots and do what I want to do.

[00:02:53.86]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Did you feel the need, during this period of, what, from '65 to—or really just the last couple of years—during this period, when you weren't really associated with a gallery, and apparently, were not actively seeking to show to have—

[00:03:13.83]

JOAN BROWN: Did I feel a need for one?

[00:03:15.40]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Did you feel the need for any kind of exposure, or was it really—

[00:03:19.90]

JOAN BROWN: None. None, and apparently, that's a rather odd frame of mind to be in. I tell people—I've told people this over the years. They haven't believed me. People who finally really do believe me, and ones who have lived with me for a long period of time, like, Manuel eventually believed that. Gordon does, but he didn't at first. When we were together, he thought it was a stance, a self-defense stance, but it's not so.

[00:03:44.58]

Jesus, I did—I was very surprised to see all these dancer paintings here. All of a sudden, that show came along at the Art Institute, quite unexpected. And here I had done all this whole

series—on and off, this whole series of paintings, but never thinking in terms of showing them, or—for the feedback. It's funny. I don't know why it's, I guess—well, I guess I do know why that's so. It's an—internal need is so strong to put in form things. I don't really know what, what place all this stems from, and calls it creativity or the unconscious. I think all those things go together. There's a whole bunch of them, whole bunch of dimensions involved that go into the making of things, pictures or otherwise.

[00:04:33.76]

I know that if I don't work over a period of time, I'm extremely uncomfortable. I can do without a lot of things, but I can't do without not making pictures for my own—I have to go—go to wherever this is to do that, or I am very, very uncomfortable, and I don't know why. [Laughs.] I don't know why this is so, but it's true. And I get very, very crabby, and very moody, and all kinds of—I just don't feel right. I don't feel alive. So I have to go there, and then if I do that too much, it makes me crazy as hell. [Laughs.] So it turns in on itself too, but it's something that I need to do. And so that's probably why it's not so important to show in things like that. Although, when I'm feeling good about what I'm doing, it's fun to show, and I like to see all altogether, and they look kind of neat. It sounds silly.

[00:05:35.09]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: You mentioned—you've mentioned several times what emerges—seems to me as a goal in your painting, and that is sophistication. Which on the face of it sounds—

[00:05:50.66]

JOAN BROWN: Let's say "economy." Let's put that down too, "understated economy."

[00:05:56.87]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Okay, but the term sophistication has come up.

[00:06:00.78]

JOAN BROWN: I know. God, I'm crappy with words. I don't use words well.

[00:06:03.59]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Oh, no, I think that's interesting, and it's perhaps a slightly—well, it's an application of the term to something that seems very important to you, which is an element of reduction and economy. Simplicity, which is something that is, shall we say, labored after. It's hard work.

[00:06:29.04]

JOAN BROWN: Yes. It's much harder.

[00:06:29.56]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: It's not something that comes easily, say, or it's not a primitive quality at all.

[00:06:35.75]

JOAN BROWN: Mm-mm [negative].

[00:06:36.56]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: I think that this is interesting and quite important for your work, because it would perhaps answer some misunderstandings. People who—the observer would look at your work, and without—certainly not the sensitive observer. [They laugh.] At any rate, there is this—you do use the term "sophistication," and I don't want to belabor the point at all.

[00:07:02.63]

JOAN BROWN: No.

[00:07:03.24]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: But somehow it seems important to me, and I think it's important to you. Do you have anything—can you elaborate on that at all?

[00:07:14.75]

JOAN BROWN: A bit. I found myself thinking in conscious—and I do make a plan with sidetrack for a second, because several times on those tapes, I use both the words "unconscious" and "conscious," over and over again, as if they're entirely two different things and two different places I work from. Which I believe they are, and I'm trying to get them together a little bit more.

[00:07:40.65]

Unlike a lot of people, a lot of people I know, I trust the unconscious very, very strongly—my own—and I don't trust my conscious. My conscious mind is on the whole a mess. It looks like this painting table, just filled with nonsense, and sidetracking, and garbage, and silliness, and crap. But my unconscious are the ideas I get in the process of painting, from nowhere, from nothing, very clear, very precise.

[00:08:06.40]

My dreams—I'm a great believer in dreams. I pay a great deal of attention to them and listen to them and follow through on them in my everyday life, very strongly. Which again, comes from what we think of as the unconscious state, are very clear, to the point, absolutely clear. You know, people describe dreams—or I used to have dreams [inaudible] once in a while. And all of a sudden, one thing's going on and then something else, and it's just—and then it fades into another place, and it's all crazy and stuff. And my dreams are absolutely orderly, fantastically orderly, very clean, very clear, and color, bright color. They look just like my paintings, as a matter of fact. So as I say, my unconscious mind, I trust, always have, very strong. My conscious mind is a mess. So I'm trying to get these two together.

[00:09:00.85]

So yesterday, going back to the original point, consciously, yesterday, I felt very sophisticated in the sense of working on finishing up one of those drawings, that one from Alcatraz with that stupid dog picture in it that I've been dying to put in a couple of paintings. [Laughs.] And I like the thing. It's funny, too. It's serious, and it's funny. And people do have these in their homes, and they're very attached to their dogs and have portraits painted. And yet it's crazy, too and a lot of—I have a lot of feelings about that.

[00:09:32.00]

So I put that in that picture, copying in my picture, in my drawing, copying me, the reproduction of the painting. And it doesn't fit, and I know better. I do. I teach art, and hell, I probably wouldn't put up with that, especially in a beginning class worth a damn. I wouldn't. [Laughs.] And it doesn't work in all art terms, and what I know of what goes into a picture. And now I've been teaching fifteen years, and you think you know how to articulate it, got to pass on that dumb information. It doesn't work. I don't give a goddamn if it doesn't work at all. It doesn't work, but what does? You know, so what?

[00:10:15.51]

And for me to be able to eventually throw out a lot of my ideas about art, which I've been trying to do ever since I started, from rule number one to two thousand, which really gets fixed in our head about what makes a picture, and what doesn't—to throw them all out, which I think anybody worth a damn eventually did. Rembrandt certainly did. Goya did, Titian, Ingres, who's one of my favorites too—I've been looking a lot of him lately—throw them out the window. That, to me, would be very, very sophisticated. It's one little, tiny, minute incident I'm talking about, that I was conscious of yesterday. I'm sure I do this frequently. I hope I do on another level, but this was conscious. After I did it, Jesus, that doesn't work at all. It's totally out of context. Who gives a damn? What is in context?

[00:11:10.10]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: What do you like about—what is it that appeals about Ingres?

[00:11:13.65]

JOAN BROWN: God, the presence of his damn figures. Just, they're timeless as any—I really do respond to figures in art, I must say, as the best of Egyptian sculpture up here right now. This is a bad reproduction here, but good Egyptian sculpture. Most of Goya's figures, almost all of Ingres', many of Rembrandt's, especially the self-portrait, they're timeless. They're people that are you and I. You're sitting there, and I'm sitting here. And it doesn't matter what the garb is, whether it's some transparent, Egyptian, pleated dress and a headgear or one of those gowns that Ingres had on women or Goya. These people are absolutely timeless, and they don't—they're not dead. And that's because there's a presence to these figures. And God, Ingres and does it over and over again. There's a presence to his—to his figures.

[00:12:13.59]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Is there anything about Ingres' style in terms of—

[00:12:19.68]

JOAN BROWN: I've never seen it originally.

[00:12:20.89]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, the linear quality, though—

[00:12:22.74]

JOAN BROWN: The form, the drawing?

[00:12:23.21]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: —where there's a tremendous emphasis on drawing.

[00:12:25.75]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah, they're all wrong, too. They're all crazy, and it doesn't matter.

[00:12:29.28]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Yeah.

[00:12:29.55]

JOAN BROWN: It doesn't matter. They're absolutely believable. And the drawings are goofy, not on purpose. It just—it didn't matter to him. It's these things—they're not important. Not really. In the beginning, I think they are. If one's really going to study art, they are. But after a period of time, they're no longer. It doesn't matter. If that makes any sense.

[00:12:57.56]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: I think that makes sense.

[Recorder stops; restarts.]

[00:13:06.99]

JOAN BROWN: Is that okay?

[00:13:07.63]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Yeah.

[00:13:07.79]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah? That's it? Okay. I'm trying to finish this up with a question my son asked me the other day. I guess it was last week. And I think, Paul, you asked me this maybe somewhere along the line when we first started this tape, maybe the first tape. Maybe the second tape. I don't remember, but it's probably on here somewhere.

[00:13:25.57]

But it's very different when someone who knows something—someone who's involved in art asked you that, and just—and someone like a child asks you, "Jeez, why do you do this?" No one's made reference to this before. He says, "Don't you get bored? God, you work so hard." He goes to school in the morning and sees me getting [inaudible] and I'm coming in here to do this. And he comes home, and I'm doing this. He goes swimming. Now he's joined the swimming team. And he comes back at 7:00, 7:30, and I'm doing this. And then rush and fix dinner—usually, on the whole most of the days of the week, other than when I'm teaching.

[00:14:01.80]

And so he said, "Don't you get bored doing this?" I said, "Yes, sometimes. A lot of times, it's just a job," which I sincerely believe. The inspiration is just a very small percentage. But anyway, he asked me the other day, he said, "Why did you go into art?" And I said, "Jeez, I really don't know." And I don't. I don't know why I went in there. Okay. But maybe more to the point is why—I asked myself this—why did I stay there? And one of the reasons that I can think of—that I can answer that is because it's terribly selfish. It's the only thing that I have been involved in or can think of being involved in where there's no responsibility to anybody else.

[00:14:51.79]

And this gets into maybe some of my feelings about galleries and the public, why this isn't important. Whatever you do is strictly for yourself. And I want the freedom. Any time I feel any pressure from anybody or from any outside pressure, I'll retreat from that, push it away, push it aside, what have you, because it's the only thing I've ever done where there's absolute freedom. It has nothing to do with anything else, anyone else. I can do anything I damn well please at any given moment. I can make a total ass of myself, and I'm responsible. There's just me involved in it.

[00:15:28.08]

And nobody gets hurt. Nothing. It's a totally egocentric practice, from my point of view—the way I do it, what I do. And that's why, too, I don't bank much on being so successful in terms of making money or showing, because I really don't turn out a steady product. Tomorrow, I can get some goofy inspiration idea, what have you, and just take off and do something else. And I want that. I need that.

And as long as that kind of freedom exists, I'll continue to do it because it doesn't exist in anything else, especially when you're dealing with other people. So you can't do that in teaching. You can't do that in your family. You can't do that with your child, with your wife, with your husband, with your boyfriend, girlfriend. You can't do that in the supermarket. You can do it under no—or I can't do it under any circumstances other than in terms of making pictures. I can do anything I goddamn well please.

[00:16:24.76]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Do you feel a responsibility to an imaginary viewer—audience?

[00:16:31.34]

JOAN BROWN: No. No. That's why—I think I have, on and off, for a long time. Anyone does, with schooling. It's like, [gasps] there's some kind of art cop that's going to arrest you if you put things in out of context, and do all that. Or you do it—as one does, rebelling—you do it on purpose. You just say, "Well, okay, screw you, art person. I'm going to do this anyway." But that doesn't exist any longer with me, that I know of. So yes, you are answering, for a period of time, once you—if you've been schooled—anyone, I don't care who they are—and follow instruction for any period of time—yes, you are answering to some imaginary art person who is going to get you if you don't follow the rules. But that goes.

[00:17:18.82]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: I was thinking more on the lines of communication, evoking a response, sharing an experience.

[00:17:28.73]

JOAN BROWN: You can [inaudible]. Some people will respond and some won't. And people will do it for different reasons anyway, and that's just fine.

[00:17:34.33]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: But you don't address yourself to—

[00:17:36.05]

JOAN BROWN: No, no.

[00:17:37.66]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: If they get it, well, that's fine. You found a—

[00:17:39.67]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah, that's not selfish.

[00:17:40.21]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: —a kindred spirit or—

[00:17:41.39]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah, I know. But what's funny is—because I don't—more people respond to my stuff than I'm aware of a lot of times, you know? They respond to it on a very humane kind of basis. People do share it. I don't mean just art—in fact, less art people than regular people, even though it's all crazy. [Laughs.] They want things done. The average person wants to look at nice stuff. But somehow, they might not like it, but they respond. They can identify with something, which is very nice. But I don't mean to do that. [Laughs.]

[00:18:15.87]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Let me ask you one more question that occurs to me. How have your relationships affected your work? I'm not sure if I asked this before or not.

[00:18:28.64]

JOAN BROWN: You mean with other people?

[00:18:29.77]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Yeah, and I was thinking specifically of close relationships. You've been married three times. And this—well, obviously your art grows, as we've discussed, from life experience.

[00:18:43.87]

JOAN BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:18:44.83]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: And a marital relationship is an extremely strong, important component of a life experience.

[00:18:49.72]

JOAN BROWN: [Laughs.] As you know as well as I do. Yes. Oh, sure, it obviously affects it, and can't help that. And that's very good. Hell, if I lived by myself somewhere in a room and in a studio and that's all I damn well did, my art would just—it would die. If I just backed

myself in the corner, it would go to hell.

[00:19:11.78]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, do you feel there's a give and take—some kind of interchange with—maybe not consciously or—on the, on the surface—art talk or anything like this—but in each case, you were married to another artist.

[00:19:27.46]

JOAN BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:19:27.85]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: You do feel that there was some sort of exchange that was productive in terms of your own work.

[00:19:35.17]

JOAN BROWN: Sure. Darn right. Right.

[00:19:35.80]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Was it, at any time—

[00:19:40.04]

JOAN BROWN: It's always—

[00:19:40.42]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: —non-productive, or not as [inaudible]?

[00:19:41.57]

JOAN BROWN: It's always that, too. [Laughs.] It's both. It's simultaneous, sometimes more one way than another. But It's both. It has its negative aspects, and it has its positive aspects, and sometimes one overpowers the other. But I don't think it's absolutely necessary in terms—if it didn't exist, it wouldn't mean I still wouldn't—the relationship is what I can draw from, feed into what I'm doing. It's not that important that I have to share this other thing, as it so happens. Or maybe it is, because I have. But maybe it's less important at this point. I don't know. That's a hard question to answer.

[00:20:28.09]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Yeah, I realize that. That's why I saved it for the very end. [Laughs.]

[00:20:32.41]

JOAN BROWN: Oh.

[00:20:32.65]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: What about, if you looked over your body of work, do you think you could point to a certain work or a certain, say, series from given years, or period within a given year, and spot a mood, spot an emotional state?

[00:20:59.17]

JOAN BROWN: Sure.

[00:20:59.29]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Do you think, in other words, could an informed person write your biography, to a certain extent, from the pictures themselves?

[00:21:10.41]

JOAN BROWN: Yes, I think so. Sure. For someone—I don't even think it'd have to be so much an informed person who knows all the facts. I think someone who can respond rather emotionally to the pictures could do—oh, sure, yes. [Laughs.] I think they're a dead giveaway.

[00:21:30.62]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: So in a way, one might describe your work as a visual diary or autobiography.

[00:21:36.83]

JOAN BROWN: Diary. Sure. I have described it as such from time to time.

[00:21:40.01]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Yeah, well, I can see that.

[00:21:41.86]

JOAN BROWN: Oh, yes, absolutely. That's what it—I like keeping references, keeping notes as to what goes on. Noel really likes that, too. He goes back. And in fact, it's so strong, I think, on a family. Places—I was surprised, one time, that Gordon responded so strongly. I was showing slides down at Cal Arts—oh, hell, five years ago. Four years ago. A good five years ago. And Gordon came down, too, because he wanted to see the place. And we like Paul. [Inaudible] afterwards.

[00:22:21.98]

So he came down, too, and he stuck around for the slide thing. He hadn't seen it beforehand. He hadn't seen a lot of the old slides. And he was very, very, moved, very taken, remembering—not by art, not by the paintings, but remembering all these incidences that took place. He was surprised at his own response. I was surprised at it, too, because it did read like—it was like looking at a photo album, in terms of feeling. And Noel is very, very much that way. He'll remember situations and identify, "Oh, yes, we were doing this and that," by glancing at the pictures and stuff—again, like looking at a photo album.

[00:22:59.84]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: It's a very special photo album.

[00:23:01.59]

JOAN BROWN: Yeah. "Oh, yes. I was a baby when you did this," blah blah, blah. "And do you remember such and such when you did that painting, the buffalo," or whatever. Or, "This hung in a spot in my room when we lived on such and such." And yeah, he's very, very nostalgic that way, sentimental. And there's a difference between the two words, and I get mixed up on what they are. [Laughs.] Nostalgic's something. Sentimental is something else. I like sentimental better than nostalgic. [Laughs.]

[00:23:30.70]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Oh, nostalgia seems to be a longing for the past. And sentimentality is —has to do with sentiment.

[00:23:39.77]

JOAN BROWN: Oh. Yes, okay. Yeah.

[00:23:42.47]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: I guess—

[00:23:42.92]

JOAN BROWN: More feeling, less sense.

[00:23:44.36]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: That part of the tape will be erased.

[00:23:46.46]

JOAN BROWN: All right.

[00:23:46.92]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: [Laughs.]

[00:23:47.96]

JOAN BROWN: Why not?

[Recorder stops; restarts.]

[00:23:53.96]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: End of Joan Brown interview.

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]