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Oral history interview with Michele Russo, 1983 August 29

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Michele Russo on August 29, 1983. The interview took place in Portland, Oregon, and was conducted by Jan Van Cleve for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

[Tape 1, side 1]

JANE VAN CLEVE: When were you born, Mike?

MICHELE RUSSO: I was born in 1909, April the 30, the exact date. (chuckles)

JANE VAN CLEVE: Where?

MICHELE RUSSO: In Waterbury, Connecticut.

JANE VAN CLEVE: What was that community like at that time?

MICHELE RUSSO: It was a manufacturing community largely made up of immigrant groups-- a large Italian and Irish population and also other ethnic groups.

JANE VAN CLEVE: Were your parents immigrants?

MICHELE RUSSO: Yes. They came to this country, I think my father was fifteen years old. My mother came sometime after that. They were married, I think he was twenty and she was eighteen years old.

JANE VAN CLEVE: Were they married in this country then?

MICHELE RUSSO: They were married here.

JANE VAN CLEVE: What was your father's name?

MICHELE RUSSO: My father's name was Nick. Nichola Maria Giuseppe Russo. (chuckles)

JANE VAN CLEVE: Isn't that marvelous. And your mom's name?

MICHELE RUSSO: My mother's name was Maria Philippa-- she was called Lippa-- and her last name was Iamele, which is in English, [Giamalay]. [MR pronounces his mother's name differently in Italian and English--Ed.]

JANE VAN CLEVE: Did they come from the same areas of Italy?

MICHELE RUSSO: Yes, they came from the same small town located in Provincia de Foggia, right on the boundary line between the Molise, I think it's called, and Puglia.

JANE VAN CLEVE: And it's kind of a baroque part of the country?

MICHELE RUSSO: Very, very rural.

JANE VAN CLEVE: How many children did they have?

MICHELE RUSSO: They had four children all together.

JANE VAN CLEVE: And where were you placed?

MICHELE RUSSO: I was the first one. I had three sisters following me, two of them immediately and a third one some years later.

JANE VAN CLEVE: Isn't that something, so many girls. (chuckles) Do you remember, what did your dad do when he came here? Was he educated?

MICHELE RUSSO: No, my father was a peasant, and slightly literate. I think some time after he came here, he went to night school and taught himself English. He was very much education-minded. He worked in a clock factory, I think, making watches, for a number of years. And then eventually he went into the insurance business

and became an insurance agent.

JANE VAN CLEVE: When you were little, did they keep pretty active ties with Italy?

MICHELE RUSSO: Oh yes, very much so. I think my mother, particularly. I think she probably had difficulty in mastering the language or even adjusting, because immediately after she was married and we were born, she somehow or other had some kind of crisis and a trip was recommended back to her home town. She took us kids and with her sister went back to their home town for a visit. And at that point, World WarI broke out and we were detained there for the entire period of the war. Of course that affected my experience of growing up in a very important way. I was about five years old and we came back in 1919, when I was ten years old. By that time I was completely Italianized, you might say.

JANE VAN CLEVE: When you went over to Italy, did you know the language?

MICHELE RUSSO: I really don't know that I knew the language. I know that when I was ten I did not know any English. My parents probably were Italian-speaking at that time, so I have no memories of knowing the English language.

JANE VAN CLEVE: Would you say your interest in art developed at that time?

MICHELE RUSSO: My interest in art developed later on, when I was supposed to be put in school. There was some technical problem as to whether I was eligible because I was not Italian-born, so not entitled to school. And my mother found me a tutor with whom I spent a couple of years, who taught me to read and write. He was a priest and he came from a family of artists, and spent a great deal of his time using his skill as an artist. He played a role in the community in maintaining all the artworks of the church, repairing all of the statues in the church. He designed embroidery and tombstones for people in the community.

JANE VAN CLEVE: Isn't that marvelous.

MICHELE RUSSO: He did all-around kind of skills in the arts. I was sort of an apprentice, you might say. He was not only my tutor, but there was a system where I went to his house and spent every day there all day long, so I often assisted him in what he was doing. And from that point I became very much involved and interested in art and doing things.

JANE VAN CLEVE: Did he have you draw, and that kind of thing?

MICHELE RUSSO: Yes, he would give me drawings that he had done for me to work on. And I participated very much and kind of liked it. He was an important influence on me. I think in many respects he represents a great many ideals that I think were very important in shaping my attitudes.

JANE VAN CLEVE: Sounds like a renaissance man. Like he didn't separate the artist from the community.

MICHELE RUSSO: Well, he was a jack of all trades, as I remember. He also did medical things, like patch up people and treat them for minor medical problems in the community. And he loved gardening; he had a very beautiful garden and I lived in close proximity to this garden. He raised birds and he was very fond of birds and plants and gardening, and I got involved in that kind of thing with him. He was very, I would say, faithful in his relation with me. Eventually he was drafted into the army, but while he was drafted he used to write me weekly. He used to send me fumetti or Italian comics. He used to send me magazines and he kept a constant communication.

JANE VAN CLEVE: Was he pretty young?

MICHELE RUSSO: Well, at that time he seemed quite old to me, but he was probably in his late thirties.

JANE VAN CLEVE: So he was kind of like a father substitute, too.

MICHELE RUSSO: Yes, very much so.

JANE VAN CLEVE: What was his name? Do you remember?

MICHELE RUSSO: His name was Giulio Perillo.

JANE VAN CLEVE: When you came back to the United States at ten, did you feel kind of like an outsider?

MICHELE RUSSO: Very definitely. I did not speak English and within a week of having arrived here, I was put in school, and that was a very difficult kind of situation for me. The adjustment was not easy insofar as the social world. I dressed differently, I looked different, I behaved different. So, as a result, I became a kind of a target. It

was very much of a ghetto world, where people who are slightly different are apt to be very noticeable, and I think I was very noticeable at that time, not only for not speaking the language but for many other things as well. So I became kind of aware of myself in that sense, as an outsider. I had been somewhat aware of that even in Italy. I remember as a child people making some comments that I probably could never master the Italian language. I don't know why they did that, but somehow or other that kind of impressed me, and I have always carried that idea, that somehow I could never master their language. Then when I came here, of course, I found myself in a similar situation as regards to the English language. So I think I felt maybe I was just a natural-born foreigner.

JANE VAN CLEVE: What about the art? A young man interested in art-- wouldn't that have been kind of controversial with certain mentalities at that time too?

MICHELE RUSSO: Very much so, I think, but the school I went to was a very, very progressive school. The arts and crafts were very, very important and students were encouraged to do all kinds of craftwork and artwork. So in a sense, maybe I was conspicuous because I enjoyed a certain amount of prestige with the teachers in the school because of my skills as a student. And I think the teachers were very beautiful to me. I think they paid a great deal of special attention to me, which was probably a source of embarrassment for me, as I remember. I was not a particularly articulate or communicative or cooperative boy, but they had a great deal of patience with me and pushed me into positions, I would say, of leadership and activity in the school. I was also a very good student, from a scholastic point of view, and I think teachers kind of enjoyed having me around.

JANE VAN CLEVE: Was this the school that had Latin and...

MICHELE RUSSO: Well, later on, I went to a high school which was an interestingly classical school and had a very rigid curriculum in the classics. We had 23 Latin teachers in our high school at that time, and four years of Latin were required of every student. And four years of math, and three years of language were required in the school. So the education was a very good education and was largely, I think, a very conservative kind of education, though my grade school education I would say was very liberal and very progressive for that time. We had lunch programs, we had shop, we had a swimming pool, we had all kinds of activities. And I think that perhaps, though I was not aware at that time, this school was probably a model school because it was entirely made up of immigrant children, or the children of immigrants. I think the school was intended to perform a special job of converting these young, raw immigrants into young Americans.

JANE VAN CLEVE: And sort of that settlement school philosophy, sort of the hands-on approach.

MICHELE RUSSO: Yes. We even did cooking with the girls. I remember it was optional, which probably was very unusual at that time, though I took it for granted. The boys were allowed to take cooking as well as shop, if they wanted to.

JANE VAN CLEVE: Was there the possibility of you being on the streets if something wasn't done for you? You know, in Portland with Neighborhood House, say, when the Jews began to support that in one of our ghettos about that time, it was to keep kids from becoming delinquent.

MICHELE RUSSO: That's very true, but I think my upbringing in the ghetto atmosphere was very important to my nature, as a person. I am very, I suppose, ghetto oriented, and find the ghetto very interesting, very picturesque, and very much like home. I don't feel any of the kind of insecurity that most people do feel when they are in a ghetto situation where everything seems to be too picturesque and very strange.

JANE VAN CLEVE: I'm interested, too, in the sort of yeasty political discussion that would probably go on with an immigrant group.

MICHELE RUSSO: Well, the immigrant groups from my community were, I would say, carriers of radicalism. They were anarchists and they were other people, socialists of all kinds and atheists, particularly. It seems that all the male members of the ghetto community were atheists, in that religion was relegated to the women and the children. There was a great deal of political discussion and activity and a strong feeling of working class. Working-class philosophies were highly discussed. As a child I remember the Sacco/Vanzetti cases, the activities of the anarchists who organized unions. I remember Carlo Tresca making frequent trips to Connecticut and working-class movements.

I remember also that out of this atmosphere there was a very strong anti-Fascist movement in the early days, which eventually was crushed by the fact that Fascism in Italy became the ruling regime of the Italian people, so that most of the Italians in the community eventually were brought into line with supporting Mussolini. Though I think the people from my particular community remained anti-Fascist all through that period of time to the last. This is indicative of the kind of environment I was brought up in. There was a great deal of discussion and I was very much aware of the discussion.

There was also a great deal of cultural activity in the ghetto community, concern for the arts, particularly for music and opera and plays. The Italians attempted to maintain some community activity and to keep alive some of their traditions. This was also true of the other groups, as I remember, [having made] strong contact, for example, with some of the Russian groups and some of the Jewish groups, that they had their own schools for teaching their language. They taught balalaika, they taught their own folk songs, they had singing groups, and they generally had parks and halls which were used to carry on their own activities. I was very much brought up in this kind of environment.

I had a sense, I suppose, of strong sympathy for the immigrants generally, and particularly their labor aspirations. I remember as a boy, while I was still in high school, the Sacco/Vanzetti case. I was not only impressed by the efforts of the immigrant groups as revealed through the Sacco/Vanzetti case, but I was also very aware of the American cultural community and its involvement. I remember Theodore Dreiser, Waldo Frank, and Edna St. Vincent Millay, and many other people, and this had a very curious kind of attraction for me, that the working people on one side would show so much concern for Sacco/Vanzetti, and the intellectual groups of America were equally involved. It seems to me a strange kind of combination, correlation of forces, and it has always, for me, been a kind of a guideline in my own thinking.

JANE VAN CLEVE: I can see that. I think we'll talk later about how much the worker has been a figure in your painting. But also I think there's always been an optimism to some forms of alienation that you've explored. And it sounds like there was optimism to some forms of alienation there, too.

MICHELE RUSSO: Well, I certainly was very conscious of the alienation. I believe that this community in a sense was a very grim, cruel community to the immigrant. The immigrant just had jobs, and the only provision made for his world outside of work is to have a lot of taverns all over the community, and also all the usual rackets that prevail in the working-class community. The efforts that these groups made to maintain some kind of cultural life in the community seemed to be very desperate and very, you might say, hopeless. (chuckles) And so I, very early, felt very conscious of the problem that existed in that community.

JANE VAN CLEVE: Of course, one issue that American artists have had to look at is how political to make their art. When you were still a kid, an adolescent, did you try to make your drawings or paintings reflect your social consciousness?

MICHELE RUSSO: Well, I don't think so. One aspect of my childhood is that I was bilingual and almost educated in two different cultures, which stood together side by side for me. I was a sort of an internationalist, you might say, and so I very early had a broad concept of the universal aspects of the arts. I kind of resented trying to give art a kind of a national quality and make of it something restrictive in its nature. So during that period, when there seemed to be a great deal of regionalism and nationalism, I was very uncomfortable and I thought that most of that was very, very artificial.

Actually, it was not the so-called realism that I was familiar with, though I did admire certainly artists like Ben Shahn at that time. There were some artists who seemed to carry a great deal of power and conviction in describing their concern for the national scene. And people like [Phillip--MR] Evergood I admired very much. As a matter of fact Evergood became a good friend of mine, and I've always admired his work. But then I think Evergood's work was never really restricted and never had that kind of chauvinistic narrowness of purpose and intention...

JANE VAN CLEVE: I'm sorry, I don't know who Evergood is.

MICHELE RUSSO: (chuckles)

JANE VAN CLEVE: What's his full name?

MICHELE RUSSO: Phillip Evergood.

JANE VAN CLEVE: Is he a contemporary of...?

MICHELE RUSSO: Well, he was a contemporary of mine; he probably was a few years older than I was. He was a very important figure during the WPA period, and a very important American artist, very well known. He also had a kind of mixed-up background. I think he was educated in England as a boy; his father was Australian and I think his mother was English. He was an expressionistic artist and dealt... As a matter of fact, he painted one painting that was called American Tragedy and was considered the painting of that period.

JANE VAN CLEVE: Isn't that something? Well, that's kind of getting ahead.When you were still in high school, had you identified with the figure at that point? What was your early artwork like?

MICHELE RUSSO: Well, in my high-school days my interest in art became almost one with my interest in

literature, and I might say it was a kind of a subversive activity. It seemed to be inconsistent with the kind of world I was living in. I was living in a world where all my associates and friends and community, everybody was involved in athletics and in sports and movies and all those things, and I was very much a part of that, their world. I just associated with everybody and did what everybody was doing. But I maintained an interest in literature, both English and Italian, and the arts. This was peculiar, in the sense that it was not consistent with certain of the most important directions which seemed to prevail in the community. And I was helped in this respect by a number of, I would say, misfit older immigrants, who likewise retained a very strong interest in their culture, and who somehow or other picked me out as a young man, and befriended me, gave me books to read and saw me socially and did everything possible to cultivate this side of my nature. There was a man, for example, Consalvo D'Andrea, who was a salesman and a tailor. Consalvo D'Andrea was very much interested in Italian literature and particularly in music. He was a friend of Enrico Caruso (chuckles), and very active in the cultural community and he gave me many books. He introduced me to Leopardi, the poet, and Verga, the novelist, and D'Annunzio, and Papini, and Tasso, and Alfieri. And so I became very conversant with this literature in my own peculiar way. I don't understand just how this could take place because I was not very communicative. I think I was actually sullen and resistant, but somehow or other these people were nice enough to maintain an interest in me. I don't know really what I represented to them; I must have represented something very unusual to them.

JANE VAN CLEVE: I think sometimes newcomers to a country, of an older age, will invest a lot in the young who will have a chance of being powerful in ways that they may not have, coming so late. Does that make any sense?

MICHELE RUSSO: Oh, I think that D'Andrea was a very lonely individual. I think he was very alienated, though he was certainly very capable of maintaining a very respectable and successful position in the community. Nevertheless, I think intellectually and emotionally he was a very alienated person. And as I remember, even in his own family, I think he must have felt extremely uncomfortable, so that he latched onto a person like me and somehow or other he was able to communicate to me maybe a lot of the ideals and the concerns which he had as an individual.

JANE VAN CLEVE: When you had this sort of literary influence, did it make your young imagery heroic, or romantic, or sort of an imaginary...

MICHELE RUSSO: Well, as I say, I became kind of subversive. I began to read a great deal and dip into all kinds of literature: Scandinavian literature, German literature. Even in high school I read very extensively, so that I remember actually going through a whole library in the neighborhood and starting with Zane Grey and [Vermounian] to Conrad and immediately beyond Conrad and...

JANE VAN CLEVE: What I was kind of getting at is, you entered Yale in what, 1930, was it?

MICHELE RUSSO: I went to Yale in 1929. It was the year of the Depression.

JANE VAN CLEVE: So up to that point, had your artwork been kind of naive?

MICHELE RUSSO: Yes, I had been looking at books. I was certainly very impressed by Michelangelo and the Italian Renaissance painters. I was very much aware of them, and very much impressed with the power of drawing. Drawing always seemed to mean a great deal to me at that time, and the Renaissance masters seemed to be a very powerful influence. As a matter of fact, as a boy I had nurtured myself on Dante's Divine Comedy that was profusely illustrated by Dore'. These Dore' illustrations were very, very imaginative and of course the figure was the dominant vehicle for the illustrations, and was of course the nude figure. And the nude figure was in the classical tradition.

JANE VAN CLEVE: I can see what you just said as having an influence on your strong identification with the figure, but also with a certain kind of scale that's been in your work. You work to a kind of a monumental scale; even when the image is lyrical or even when the image is comic, it's big.

MICHELE RUSSO: That's probably true. I was never, you might say, inclined towards the genre aspects of painting. And I suppose it comes from my kind of classically rooted upbringing.

JANE VAN CLEVE: There's a kind of a heroic quality.

MICHELE RUSSO: Yes.

JANE VAN CLEVE: Even when you're being antiheroic in your comment.

MICHELE RUSSO: (chuckles)

JANE VAN CLEVE: You know, it's still big.

MICHELE RUSSO: Yes. I don't know whether I like the word heroic. I do like the idea of something that has power and simplicity, and is both subtle and simple. That the subtleties are not arrived at through all kinds of trivial devices, but are stated in a very big way. And where they're not seen, but are a very powerful element in the simplicity of the work.

JANE VAN CLEVE: Well, when you went to Yale, you were going for a Bachelor in Fine Arts. Was that just a classical curriculum where you were to take general humanities courses along with art courses, or was it exclusively art courses?

MICHELE RUSSO: Well, it was really a professional art school and did not include any of the humanities. There were, I think, only one or two courses required in the history of art, and nothing else of a classical nature that was required. Of course at that time, I might say, that I don't think I even knew what a degree meant. I don't think I was particularly oriented toward education and a degree. I had been out of high school for a couple of years. I had no intention of going away to college, though I was kind of brought up with the idea that someday I would go away to school, but I had no idea as to what I would become.

And during this period of time-- I think while I was in high school-- I developed a sense that I wanted to be really a working man. I think I became somewhat suspicious of my intellectual and artistic inclinations, and saw them as somewhat morbid and part of my difficult nature. I wanted to be really a working man, and I stayed out of school for a couple of years for several reasons. First to find out whether I was a working man and, two, to save some money. (chuckles)

JANE VAN CLEVE: Was this like blue-collar work, like ditch-digging?

MICHELE RUSSO: I worked at all kinds of jobs, but most of all I worked as a house painter. I was a full-scale house painter, eventually, and earned money painting houses. But I think what decided me to go away to school was really to drop out from society. I think that was the most important thing. I discovered that the kind of environment I was in was very, very difficult and very impossible and that I needed to make a complete change. Not that I had any optimistic attitudes about the arts, but simply because I thought it was very essential for me to get into something that was more consistent with my nature, and something that would be an escape, also, from the kind of world that I was living in. And that's why I went to Yale.

JANE VAN CLEVE: Wasn't Yale a kind of an elite alternative?

MICHELE RUSSO: Yes, I was, I think, very misplaced at Yale. I was always in financial difficulties all the time I was there, and at that time, Yale being a school of rich people, there was not much sympathy for anybody who had financial difficulties. As a matter of fact, I was advised to leave; that having the financial difficulties I did did not create a proper advantageous situation for a student there. But I was very stubborn and was also anti-Yale, to the extent that I was very determined to do whatever I wanted to do, rather than follow their advice.

JANE VAN CLEVE: This was a time when art education was very academic, wasn't it?

MICHELE RUSSO: Well, Yale certainly was very, very academic. This was, I might say, a time which was a little bit before the advent of modern art in America. Though modern art came in 1913, I think that it had not really made any great impact on American culture until a much later period. So Yale was a very academic school, based on what they considered traditional practices of the old masters. And insofar as the school was concerned, officially there was no such thing as modern art. Modern art was more or less a tragic accident or a tragic nightmare from which people would awaken some day and discover that the only true artists were people like Rubens and Caravaggio and Michelangelo. And so the training at the school was entirely based on what was believed to be the old academic system of teaching. You spent a half a day drawing, you spent a half a day painting. You drew every day from the model. That's five days a week. And you painted in a life class-- well, you started painting actually from plaster casts, and then you were moved into life painting, you painted life for several years. And then [when] you got into your so-called fifth year, you did a thesis.

JANE VAN CLEVE: Could you be experimental with the figure?

MICHELE RUSSO: None at all. There was no experimentation allowed. That kind of freedom was considered a form of delinquency. You were presumably free to do whatever you wanted to after you got out of school, but while you were in school you were under obligation to perform all the duties required of you by this very rigid system of painting. As a matter of fact, the method of painting was that you executed the paintings by very laborious practices. You made studies of hands, you made studies of feet, of drapery. You compiled an enormous data of studies, and then the painting was executed in black and white. And then it was glazed over, so that it took a whole year to do one painting.

JANE VAN CLEVE: Did you have to use conventional perspective?

MICHELE RUSSO: Yes. We did actually scientific perspective, the kind of perspective that at times one could not understand. I don't remember anybody actually understanding some of the laws of perspective. So we got way beyond the required sense of perspective that most artists have and need.

JANE VAN CLEVE: It's a wonder this didn't destroy your interest in the figure, if you always saw the figure in the kind of traditional way.

MICHELE RUSSO: Well, it didn't destroy my interest in the figure, but it certainly stimulated my hostility toward the establishment. (laughter)

[Tape 1, side 2]
[The clarity of this tape varies considerably, suggesting that MR is moving around in the studio--Ed.]

JANE VAN CLEVE: Did it suggest to you being kind of an outlaw with the figure? Having seen your latest work, I know your figure is very maverick and precariously poised and sort of confronts us with some uncomfortable things as well as some comfortable things. Do you think that started that soon?

MICHELE RUSSO: Well, I certainly saw the difference between a personal attitude about the human figure and the so-called academic conception of the figure, and found it very hard to relate the two. I've always admired the old masters, and I always have believed that the old masters had a very personal feeling about the human figure, and that the traditional Yale attitude about the human figure was extremely formal and yet without any concept of formality either. It was just willy-nilly senseless, as far as I was concerned. It was illustrative and very precise and presumably very anatomical. There was no room for interpretation, for exaggeration, or for any personal expression as far as the figure was concerned. This was very difficult for me. I had very strong negative attitudes about it, but I certainly was not enlightened enough to be clear as to what I myself was searching for, though I think I continued in many ways to follow my own directions. I spent a great deal of time in the library looking at works of art. For example, at that time we did not know anything about German expressionism, but I remember some old magazines in the library, Kunst and Kunstler, that were very rich with illustrations of what was going on in the German expressionist movement. And I was very much fascinated by the work of the German expressionists, who seemed to be very wild and very free and very emotional, certainly a relief and a release from the deadly academic point of view that was at Yale. Also at that time, there was a kind of a renaissance in American art, particularly the art of the Mexicans. And in the art of the Mexicans you have a kind of academic revival of the mural and the monumentality of painting blended with a realism and with nationalism. This was a very powerful movement that was very challenging. I remember we students were very much interested in the Mexican painting, to the extent that we brought Orozco to Yale to speak to the student body. He was invited by the students and not by the institution. It was very interesting to meet Orozco at that time, and to hear him speak. He was a very humble man and he said to us-- it was kind of embarrassing-- "You all can draw very well," he says, "but why don't you move out of the classroom sometime and go out in the street and draw." (chuckles)

JANE VAN CLEVE: What was the expectation of these teachers? That you would be artists who then became teachers in the same manner that they were? I mean you had teachers who were artists didn't you?

MICHELE RUSSO: I really don't believe so. I think that most of the teachers there were products of the school. The school actually was under the dominance of one important individual, who was not there in evidence very much, and that was Eugene Savage. Eugene Savage was an academic mural painter, and his importance to Yale was his connection with the Prix de Rome, and the main direction and the impulse of Yale was to win the Prix de Rome. They had a long history of winning every year. The Prix de Rome at that time was a considerable prize; I think it meant four years in Rome with all expenses paid. And the school's effort was directed toward winning, so that the thesis actually was a submission to the Prix de Rome. Generally every year somebody from Yale won, and it was largely done, I think, under the supervision of this man, Eugene Savage, whose students and apprentices succeeded in winning the Prix de Rome year after year.

JANE VAN CLEVE: So if you were out of sync with his aesthetic you wouldn't get the same kind of encouragement as someone who was more clearly a protege.

MICHELE RUSSO: Well, I didn't get any encouragement of any kind, because there was no latitude of any sort. Any departure from the curriculum there did not meet with any sympathy of any kind.

JANE VAN CLEVE: How did students fight back? Did you go to New York and kind of gallery crawl?

MICHELE RUSSO: I don't think the students did fight back, actually; I think the students were very respectful toward the institution and tried to comply with what was required of them. I think what happened to a student was really what happened after they got out of school. That they discovered they were completely out of step

with what was going on in the world of art. And I think most of the students actually gave up. There were in my time only a handful of students, four or five, who actually nurtured each other in doing what they did.

JANE VAN CLEVE: Did some of those people go on to become significant artists?

MICHELE RUSSO: I really don't know of anybody. Whenever I have met any members of my class, they were always very apologetic because of the fact that they gave up art.

JANE VAN CLEVE: Did you meet Sally [Haley, future wife--Ed.] at Yale?

MICHELE RUSSO: No, I met her after Yale.

JANE VAN CLEVE: But she went to Yale too, didn't she?

MICHELE RUSSO: She was there at Yale. She was a year or two years ahead of me.

JANE VAN CLEVE: This is Sally Haley, who is a painter in her own right. Was she unusual; were there many women at Yale at that time?

MICHELE RUSSO: There were quite a few women at Yale. In effect there was a man's world there at Yale, just like it was everywhere at that time. She was a very outstanding student, and seemed to have a great deal of the kind of skills and ability that met the requirements at Yale.

JANE VAN CLEVE: Did she come from a more affluent background?

MICHELE RUSSO: She came from a middle-class background. Her father was a photographer, and I think her family was much more sympathetically oriented and conscious of the world of art, so she was brought up in that kind of environment. As a matter of fact, her older brother was an artist who had studied with the Art Students' League in New York. His name was Duane Haley, and he was very much into the kind of movement that came out of the John Sloan, American Ashcan School of painting at that time.

JANE VAN CLEVE: What year did you meet her?

MICHELE RUSSO: I met her in 1935.

JANE VAN CLEVE: And you graduated from Yale in 1934?

MICHELE RUSSO: I believe so.

JANE VAN CLEVE: The reason that's so interesting to me is that you both became strongly identified with underdog social figures, you know, with the workers, with the WPA, with radical politics. And it's interesting that this rapport could happen when you had such different backgrounds.

MICHELE RUSSO: Well, I think the national and the international situation had a lot to do toward bringing a lot of people together. We not only had a great Depression, which made the economic difficulties of the country outstanding, but we were having an international crisis. The rise of Hitler in Europe and Mussolini in Europe had created a world situation which was full of tension, and the future catastrophic happenings were very much in evidence at the time, so that we were concerned both for the international and the national situation. It was not unusual to meet many, many people who were very much involved in this awareness of what was going on. And I think that Sally, in having married me, married into this kind of problem. (chuckles)

JANE VAN CLEVE: Was the Communist Party beginning to be active at that time?

MICHELE RUSSO: Yes, the Communist Party was gaining a great deal of prominence as an organizer of the peace movement and the movement against Fascism. There were many organizations in a movement in this country at that time, which were directed against war and Fascism, particularly artists. They were organizing, practically to the last man, for a national congress against war and Fascism. At that time Stuart Davis was actually our president of the congress and Rockwell Kent was vice president. And he united all forces of the cultural and intellectual world against war and Fascism.

JANE VAN CLEVE: Was this simultaneous to the development of the WPA?

MICHELE RUSSO: Yes, this was part of an awareness that was very evident in the WPA movement, the Works Progress Administration, and all the programs which dealt with the revival of music, revival of photography, the discovery of folk art, the regionalism in the arts. America became very self-aware and began to document the very marrow of its nationalism. And all kinds of fantastic things happened. There was certainly an important incentive given to the dance and the theater, and also to the racial question. There was a great deal of

consciousness and awareness, and it was based on searching experimentation and resistance and militancy.

JANE VAN CLEVE: When did you start working for the WPA, in Connecticut?

MICHELE RUSSO: Actually I started working on WPA very early as a student. Since I was having financial problems, I applied-- as I remember, FERA was the first program-- and was able to get on that.

JANE VAN CLEVE: What did that stand for, FERA?

MICHELE RUSSO: Federal Emergency Relief Administration.

JANE VAN CLEVE: Did they give you assignments? How did that work?

MICHELE RUSSO: Well, there were projects submitted. We were doing mostly mural projects at that time, and decorating schools. I remember working on a number of schools. I remember working with Tom Folds and John Ballator, who was from Portland, Oregon, and went to Yale with me, was a roommate of mine-- working at the Nathan Hale High School in Hamden, Connecticut. We did some murals there. I remember working with another student who was the head of project, Basilio Yurchenko, in Christopher Columbus School in New Haven.

JANE VAN CLEVE: Did you have to do kind of moralistic murals?

MICHELE RUSSO: I was mostly a collaborator. I adjusted myself to whatever was going on. (laughter) I did not particularly care for the responsibility of creating these projects. I was not always too happy with either the subject matter or the style of painting, so I was more than pleased to earn some money just working on these projects.

JANE VAN CLEVE: And then did you do your own work on the side?

MICHELE RUSSO: I did some work on the side. This was a period when I became involved in all kinds of activism. I started a new student movement at Yale. There used to be a John Reed club, which was an activist organization of students. The John Reed club combined artists and writers, particularly, but also included people who were interested in dancing, and there were a great many working men even, that were drawn into the kind of activities. They had a very outstanding theater group, called the Unity Players, which were very active in Connecticut and in New Haven, and actually received a number of awards from Yale University itself for outstanding works. I remember their playing Waiting for Lefty, at that time, by Clifford Odets. We were very much involved in student activities of all kinds and running from one campus to another, holding conferences and mass meetings against war and against Fascism. I remember one notable event that we staged in a New Haven church. We put Hitler on trial in New Haven, and we had a member of the German Reichstag, who was a refugee, testifying against Hitler. It was a very dramatic kind of scene and it was quite an experience for me to participate in.

JANE VAN CLEVE: Was this in about 1936, or about what was the time?

MICHELE RUSSO: That was probably in 1934 or '35.

JANE VAN CLEVE: That early?

MICHELE RUSSO: Hitler had just come to power. And I think it was immediately [after] the famous Reichstagfire in Germany.

JANE VAN CLEVE: How did you get your information about what was happening in Europe? Was the American press pretty savvy?

MICHELE RUSSO: The press was full of information concerning the European situation. And there were a lot of refugees from Europe finding their way here, who became an important part of the American movement.

JANE VAN CLEVE: Did you have small ethnic newspapers that also kind of...?

MICHELE RUSSO: Yes, we had Italian-language newspapers, and there were all kinds of Italian Communist newspapers as well as the famous Daily Worker of that time.

JANE VAN CLEVE: At that time when you became so interested in what was to become controversial politics, did you know it would be controversial? I mean, did you have any idea...?

MICHELE RUSSO: Oh, it was very evident at that time that it was not only controversial but there were a lot of penalties imposed on people involved.

JANE VAN CLEVE: So even in the thirties, you could sort of anticipate the McCarthyism of the fifties?

MICHELE RUSSO: Well, certainly, very much so. I think the FBI was very much in evidence in the plays. You had to contend with the police, every move you made, during that time. So McCarthyism was really just simply an official manifestation of what was taking place throughout the entire country.

JANE VAN CLEVE: It's very appealing to think that artists sort of sensed the front wave of thinking, humanistic concerns. But do you think that that's always so, in other artists?

MICHELE RUSSO: I think so. I think the artists are very sensitively attuned to what goes on in the world, and I think that what has been recorded in art will be a much more sensitive documentation [of--Ed.] what really happened in history.

JANE VAN CLEVE: When did you and Sally get married?

MICHELE RUSSO: I think we got married in 1935.

JANE VAN CLEVE: And did she work for the WPA too?

MICHELE RUSSO: No. She didn't work for the WPA. Oh, yes, she did actually a mural project. She was invited to do a mural project for a post office in Ohio.

JANE VAN CLEVE: Did she have to go to Ohio then?

MICHELE RUSSO: No. She painted it in Connecticut, and I remember going to Ohio to install it myself.

JANE VAN CLEVE: You have two sons, Mike, Jr., and John. Were they born when you were still in Connecticut?

MICHELE RUSSO: Yes. Mike was born in Connecticut and he was ten years old in 1947, when we came here to the west coast. [John was born in 1950--Ed.]

JANE VAN CLEVE: When World War II broke out, you put the painting aside for a while?

[Clarity improved for a while, and then from here to the end, MR's voice is very soft and there is much tape hiss--Ed.]

MICHELE RUSSO: Yes, I went, as all the artists I think did, into the war industries. Louis Bunce went into the shipyards and I went into the war industries also, and I worked for several industries in Connecticut. I worked first in a clock industry where they were making [Koonen] bank instruments for airplanes. Then later I worked in a chemical industry.

JANE VAN CLEVE: What did you do? Did you have a chemical background?

MICHELE RUSSO: No, I did not. I worked in a chemical laboratory carrying out the experiments that came from the research lab. I worked there for quite some time and then I decided that I was really not a scientist or a chemist, that I wanted to go to work in my own particular area, and I told them that I was interested in looking for work in the arts. And they said, "Well, we can't let you go." I said, "Well, make a job for me." (laughs) I was transferred to an engineering development group and I was hired as an artist technician.

JANE VAN CLEVE: Was that designing plants and...

MICHELE RUSSO: That's right.

JANE VAN CLEVE: And how long did that last?

MICHELE RUSSO: I think altogther I worked about four years there.

JANE VAN CLEVE: Was that a kind of moral dilemma for you to be working in a war industry after you'd already become strongly identified with the peace movement? Or did you see it as anti-Fascism?

MICHELE RUSSO: Well, yes. The war became definitely a war against Fascism, and once that became clear... Then I personally had always felt that Fascism was a great threat to the world, so I had no reluctance about working in the war industry.

JANE VAN CLEVE: You mentioned the FBI being evident in the thirties. When you finished with the war industry, had you still maintained your kind of radical politics?

MICHELE RUSSO: I always maintained radical politics and always had difficulties with the FBI. I never had a job

that the FBI didn't try to get me fired from.

JANE VAN CLEVE: Was that because they thought you were communistic?

MICHELE RUSSO: Well, I think anybody that was an activist in those days was subjected to that kind of treatment, particularly if you were in any position of leadership in the activist movement. You were generally followed around by the FBI and the FBI kept track of what you were doing at all times. If you were having contact with any individuals, such as have employment, they would always show up and try to convince your employer what a dangerous person you were and how you should be fired. Of course that didn't really succeed very often because I'm quite sure that people who knew me and who employed me did not always agree with the FBI that I was a dangerous individual.

JANE VAN CLEVE: Did you know right from the outset that you were going to be a painter, or were you interested in your printmaking too, and other kinds...?

MICHELE RUSSO: I was always interested in the print. I wanted to be a printer; there's no question about it. But my main interest was painting. And I don't know, I think I was so often frustrated as are individuals who like to do many things. I was also interested in working with materials and sculpture, but eventually with all the demands that are made on you, you have to kind of make a decision as to what you're going to do, and painting was the basically most important.

JANE VAN CLEVE: I don't know much about the gallery system at that time. Was there an opportunity for young people to get their work seen?

MICHELE RUSSO: Not at all. There were no galleries in the regions, and there was no gallery here, except for Louis Bunce's Kharouba Gallery, and when that closed there was no gallery here at all in Portland. So the gallery scene was not at all what it is today, and no other opportunities to show works of art. People showed paintings in restaurants and theater lobbies and wherever they could, so that as far as having some real businesslike agency showing and dealing with your work, I think at that time was not known. It was rather a negative picture.

JANE VAN CLEVE: Did the museums on the east coast feel any obligation to feature contemporary...?

MICHELE RUSSO: Actually, one of the main attractions for my coming here was the kind of situation that exists in the museum. The museum here, I think, had a very strong relationship with local artists, and the local artists participated very actively in the museum. The museum actually gave the local artists a gallery and the artists managed a gallery in the museum in which they showed their work. At that time it was more or less a very idealistic kind of relationship between artists and the museum, which later on seems to have cooled off and dissipated.

JANE VAN CLEVE: When you were still in Connecticut, did you have a community of other artists where you could kind of at least show each other your work?

MICHELE RUSSO: Not really. There were some personalities, but again there were no galleries. There was a museum in Hartford, Connecticut. I remember showing some paintings in the museum. There was an Artists' Congress in Connecticut, a chapter which I helped to organize, and we were establishing, more or less, a kind of a local community from the different cities in Connecticut, and becoming known to each other that way. But I would say that there was not much social response to the arts and to the artist, so the artist was very much of a isolated individual in the community.

JANE VAN CLEVE: At the same time, there must have been awareness on the part of you young artists about new theory regarding art coming from Europe.

MICHELE RUSSO: Well, art was very stimulating, very controversial, because the presence of European art and modern art was being made felt, very strongly. Like in New York, there was a very strong group that was oriented toward European art, and of course the appearance of the Museum of Modern Art, which was I think somewhere in the early thirties, was a very important event in America. They created a focal center in the nation; they gave importance to modern art. And it was also a very controversial idea to have a museum of modern art. All the young people really rallied to the Museum of Modern Art; they looked up to the Museum of Modern Art as an ideal, and as a means through which we could become aware of what was going in the world of art, and particularly the European situation. I think Europe had been an important haven for American artists; many American artists had gone to Europe and studied in Europe, particularly those people who became leading figures in defense of the modern abstract European...

JANE VAN CLEVE: Is Milton Avery one of your contemporaries? Would he be considered a contemporary?

MICHELE RUSSO: Yes.

[Break in taping]

JANE VAN CLEVE: Now, Mike, when did you start coming west?

MICHELE RUSSO: Well, I came west in the middle of the Depression. Actually at the times of The Grapes of Wrath. In 1936, Sally and I crossed in an old Model-A Ford. We made that trip in the middle of winter, without any curtains or any heat in the car, and we felt very close to the hardships of the pioneers.

JANE VAN CLEVE: Was this when you first went to Colorado?

MICHELE RUSSO: Yes.

JANE VAN CLEVE: How did you pick Colorado?

MICHELE RUSSO: Well, I didn't really pick Colorado. I had a fellowship from Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center for one year, and a lump sum of money to go out there. So I went out there. It was an opportunity to study with two artists who at that time were very prominent: Boardman Robinson, who had taught for many years at the Art Students' League and was very well known, also as a cartoonist, I believe. He had also done one of the first murals, I think, of that time, at the Bergdorf-Goodman I think, in Philadelphia. The Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center had just opened and he had been appointed director. The other was George Biddle, who was a painter as well as a printmaker and was very well known in the country. He had been very influential with the Roosevelt administration in establishing the fine arts program.

JANE VAN CLEVE: Were these figurative painters?

MICHELE RUSSO: Both were figurative painters.

JANE VAN CLEVE: By this time had Abstract Expressionism...? No. It hadn't.

MICHELE RUSSO: No, the Abstract Expressionist movement had not surfaced at all. As a matter of fact at that time, if you visit the Museum of Modern Art, it was all French painting, and all belonging to the classical modern French school. There was no element of German painting. German painting was not to be seen anywhere until a much later period.

JANE VAN CLEVE: Though it was going on, wasn't it?

MICHELE RUSSO: Yeah.

JANE VAN CLEVE: Did you stay at Colorado longer than a year?

MICHELE RUSSO: No, I stayed I think about eight months, and it was a very good experience. I traveled quite a bit, quite a ways down the Rocky Mountains, to Santa Fe, and I met many people down there and made contacts with a lot of interesting groups. The Chicanos, or the Hispanic population, was a very important group of the area, and figured very prominently in the unemployed movement.

JANE VAN CLEVE: Were they organized?

MICHELE RUSSO: Yes.

JANE VAN CLEVE: Did you do any political activity in Colorado?

MICHELE RUSSO: Yes, while I was in Colorado I not only went to school, but I also got involved in the Unemployed Movement. There was a very interesting auto worker from Flint, Michigan, by the name of Pete Sestes there. He was a great movement leader of the unemployed, and we became fast friends and worked together during that period of time. We had a big [naval] demonstration in the county courthouse, in which I was a speaker, and my interest in the unemployed movement was very strong at that period of time, and continuous.

JANE VAN CLEVE: Did you use your own name?

MICHELE RUSSO: Actually, the time was very, very difficult and I felt very, very sad, but you had to be very careful about your name appearing in any literature or in public. At the time I was not interested in creating a conflict between my student status at the school and my fellowship and what I was doing in the community. So I used a different name. I went under the name of Mike Reese, which was close to my own name. I remember that there were inquiries about who I was, and I was very conscious of the fact that people were interested in finding out who I was and that that could have repercussions.

JANE VAN CLEVE: Did you know at that time that you would probably be a teacher?

MICHELE RUSSO: Not really, though it was a tremendous impetus to me, [saw] such a great deal of support and particularly did I enjoy having a friendship with Boardman Robinson, who also had a long history of social activity in America and knew everybody, both in the intellectual movement of America (was very intimately acquainted with writers and actors and activists of all kinds), and had himself played a very important public role yet Russia, covering the Russian revolution, I think for one of the big papers-- I don't know whether it's the Herald or the Tribune-- and had I think personally met Lenin. He was an extremely interesting person and he and I struck it off very well, though I was very much younger. He enjoyed more or less reviewing his whole history by going through his files and acquainting me with a lot of the very interesting details of [his] life. He was an extremely interesting person. He was also was quite an actor and he played in Shakespeare; he played particularly King Lear. He looked like a King Lear type. He had a huge beard and fierce eyebrows and he played in the Shakespearean plays at that time at Aspen, Colorado.

JANE VAN CLEVE: Yeah, there's a kind of expansiveness of spirit possible then, you know.

MICHELE RUSSO: Yes.

JANE VAN CLEVE: Without so much professionalism.

MICHELE RUSSO: I think that for that generation there had been a long history of association with literary people. There was an actual Bohemia at that time in New York, which was a whole community of artists from all areas of cultural activity mixing together, and also very much involved. A lot of them had assignments from newspapers and had journalistic backgrounds, and were very much into the contemporary scene.

[Tape 2, side 1]

JANE VAN CLEVE: Mike, you were talking about Boardman having strong literary influences or experiences. It seems to me that there's a kind of subtle literary quality in your work too, particularly the most recent work. Your early figures were very sensual, very lyrical, and you seemed to be interested in the power of paint as paint. But more recently, in the last ten years, say, your figures have become more angular, the surfaces are flatter, the colors very bright and clearly defined, the figures have no facial articulation, there's not an individualized psychology implied as much as a body psychology. It's almost like you are exploring the possibilities of body language, both personally and socially. Is that possible?

MICHELE RUSSO: [some lost words in arranging microphone--Ed.] ...detail...and texture, and actually found myself more fascinated by geometry. Geometry seems to have the simplification that I sought and geometry seemed to have a monumentality and an emotional quality that was very, very beautiful to me. Simple surfaces seemed to be pure and beautiful and emotional, where textured surface got to seem very pointless and very trivial and a lot of, I thought, empty display of the skill of the artist. So I've gotten to the process of simplifying forms and shapes and color as well.

JANE VAN CLEVE: Some of your constituencies, some of your fans, got very angry when you did that.

MICHELE RUSSO: Yes, they did, and I was somewhat puzzled myself because most of these things were happening intuitively and I was not always sure of what was happening, whether it was any good. For a period of time, actually, I began to develop a theory that I was a captive, that I really didn't know who Mike Russo was. I was a captive and I was following impulses which I could not quite understand. But eventually I began to understand what was happening and I think I've more consciously worked in that direction.

JANE VAN CLEVE: Of course I see your work that has become simpler, but in some ways I see it as bolder and much more telling of a point of view and a thing to say than I really would have found in the early work.

MICHELE RUSSO: I think that's very true, and I think it's actually part of my nature. I think I'm probably an abrasive individual, and I think my work has become less ambiguous and I would say brutally simple. Whatever statement is made is made very clearly so that people either like it or don't like it, and there's no ambivalence about it. Now, I like that myself. I think for me that is a form of articulateness. I'm not really a very articulate person, but I like the work to speak plainly and clearly whatever it is that I represent. I would like my paintings to be even more so. I would like my paintings to be a very simple experience in clarity and in dealing with subtleties and sensibilities, without necessarily using all the devices that I think oftentimes do not directly go to the heart of saying what needs to be said.

JANE VAN CLEVE: I sense also a quality of fear in your work. I can't explain this very well, but...

MICHELE RUSSO: Well, I suppose there is the element of shock. I think there's a certain, I might say, arrogance, which I have a tendency to associate with myself. I think of myself as a very humble person, but I think in my

practical life oftentimes I resort to a kind of arrogance. Whether that is actually arrogance or forcefulness I really don't know, but I've liked the idea of making an impact. Even if you don't make a point, I think it's very important to have an impact. And I think that the impact should be one that more or less establishes itself indelibly on the memory.

JANE VAN CLEVE: Well, I think when you have female forms around a big shoe, or you have a woman juggling hats, or you have a painting of one hat, you know, that there's an impact that's very provocative.

MICHELE RUSSO: Yes.

JANE VAN CLEVE: The image may be direct, but the response to it tends to be complex.

MICHELE RUSSO: Well, I think because it makes a direct reference to the male/female problem and relationship in a way that goes right to the heart of it, and deals with the actual, some of the elements of chauvinism and some of the symbols, like the hats and the big shoes and the umbrellas, and the woman playing with the man's symbols, women playing and juggling hats. I think that sort of thing is a kind of a direct confrontation, dealing with the issue of man and woman. And I think it's a very important part of that issue.

JANE VAN CLEVE: But the funny thing is your tone, because there's always a lot of humor conveyed. And also a kind of innocence; you know, you're not acerbic in those confrontations.

MICHELE RUSSO: Well, I believe in that. I don't think that all relations between men and women can be reduced to chauvinistic, critical experiences. I think the element of play is very important. And I think the element of absurdity is very, very important. Life would be impossible without people having this ability to play and to engage in the absurd and that this is really a very important part of the relationship between men and women. And I rather like this; I find it very engaging, very human and very revealing, and also very humorous, because of the contradictions, and the absurdity and the
irrationality I think is a very essential part of life. I define reality to include all those things.

JANE VAN CLEVE: How can you teach a student to begin to get on the path where he or she eventually understands what you understand?

MICHELE RUSSO: Oh, by shocking them a great deal of the time, and... Yes, I think really by shocking them, and by associating with them. I think that's a very important part. At first they become very suspicious and very insecure in relation to these ideas, but once they know you they develop a sense of security which comes from your personality, and they begin to find some of these ideas kind of interesting to explore. And drop all of their so-called negativism toward these ideas. Originally their concept of what is possible is to reject all these ideas, where my concept is to face up to all of these ideas and to recognize their legitimacy as an important part of life. So I think a lot of the students eventually become kind of liberated from their fears and frustrations once they discover that these things are a very interesting resource.

JANE VAN CLEVE: Is the museum school unique for its close relationship between the faculty and the students?

MICHELE RUSSO: Yes, I think really the dominant aspect of the general experience of the school is the closeness of teachers and students, which not only exists in the classroom but outside the classroom. I think a lot of the teachers and students are really good friends, and that friendship continues to exist after students get out of school for many, many years. I think that is a very healthy and very good relationship.

JANE VAN CLEVE: It's like the kids never leave you. You know, I've seen you connected with people for like 30 years.

MICHELE RUSSO: That's right. And I personally don't like to leave them, too, because I enjoy something in common with them. And I think that's very important.

[Break in taping]

JANE VAN CLEVE: Okay, Mike, you mentioned that early on at the museum school, you wanted to see a curriculum developed. How did you go about doing that?

MICHELE RUSSO: Well, when I came to the school it had a long history of just teachers teaching, and the curriculum was mostly a reflection of personalities, that exercised influence over what went on in the classroom. For example, I would say that Louis Bunce played a very important role for establishing an emphasis, an interest in modern art, largely through his dramatic presence and role in the community as a modern artist, and in his teaching in the school as well, so that modern art became an important emphasis in the education of the students. At that time there was really no regular curriculum, just the influence of different personalities on the curriculum.

To me, it was very evident that a curriculum would not come into being until the staff of the school would function as an organized group that would set itself the obligation of examining the curriculum rather than letting each person teach as they wished, and try to establish some pattern, some course of development. There was a great deal of resistance on the part of the staff to organize, because that seemed to require additional obligations, both in terms of time and in terms of concern and meetings.

I think it's also true that the leadership of the school, as it was exercised through the office of the dean, also saw the faculty as emerging as an authority and was not too happy with the possibility of the faculty usurping the role of the office in making decisions concerning teaching qualifications and curriculum as well. But eventually the idea did prevail, the staff did become organized, and a curriculum committee was brought into existence, as well as a tenure committee. It was the role of the curriculum committee to study the curriculum and to try to develop a pattern of experience for the students that would give the students a coherent sense of what was happening. In a way I think I was brought into the school for that purpose. I think I became the history teacher in the school. And that represented in itself a concern for the curriculum, because the feeling was that class, work-studio experience was not sufficient in itself, that there should be some intellectual process of education such as the history of art, to help the students to develop. So maybe my concern for curriculum grew out of my role also as a teacher of history courses. I think Rachael Griffin also was concerned that way, because I think Rachael Griffin was education oriented, and she was very much part of the faculty at that time.

Eventually the faculty was organized and the tenure committee was charged with the responsibility of not only dealing with the conditions of teaching, but also with the qualifications of individuals, and in that way the school was really transformed from what was a kind of haphazard, spontaneous professional art school into a much more organized systematic school.

JANE VAN CLEVE: Was there equal development in all the forms of art? Like was there-- we've only mentioned painters-- was there a sculpture department?

MICHELE RUSSO: Well, the truth of the matter is that in the earliest period of the school, the crafts were the most important. So that when I came to the school I was very conscious that there was a strong craft tradition, particularly in ceramic, and there had been a weaving tradition. So it was strongly oriented toward design and craft. There was a background, but it seemed that a new orientation was being created through more and more interest in the painting and sculpture.

JANE VAN CLEVE: Who were the sculpture teachers?

MICHELE RUSSO: Well, Fred Littman was the only sculptor, actually, at that time, and largely determined the main influence in sculpture. Fred Littman was a European and had a background of experience in Europe, and had certain traditional ties with artists like Maillol and Rodin and the modeling technique in clay. I think the sculpture experience in the school, the sculpture studio, was run largely through his personality and his understanding of what students should learn.

JANE VAN CLEVE: When did Jack McLarty come on the scene?

MICHELE RUSSO: Jack McLarty was already on the staff when I came in 1948. I think he was already teaching in 1947. I think Louis Bunce also came on around 1947. I think at that time there was an influx of war veterans, so that the school was expanding both as to enrollment and what it intended to offer to students. And in this period of expansion, many of these changes were taking place.

JANE VAN CLEVE: Was there any one interested in the print?

MICHELE RUSSO: The print department came under the jurisdiction of the dean at that time, Bill Givler, who was a lithographer and who taught lithography.

JANE VAN CLEVE: It seems like we have a strong Northwest print tradition now, and I have always kind of credited Lloyd Reynolds with a lot of energy for the interest in graphic arts in Portland.

MICHELE RUSSO: Well, that's an interesting part of the history of the school. The school always maintained very close ties with Reed College, and Lloyd Reynolds taught both at Reed and at the school. He had teaching responsibilities in the museum [school--Ed.]. And so his influence was felt at both places simultaneously.

And likewise, we as a staff had close ties with Reed. These ties became very strong and very obvious when Jim McGarrell came to Reed. There was really a strong working relationship between Reed and the museum [school--Ed.], so that we shared activities at Reed, exhibitions were taking place at Reed. I remember at that time having one-man shows at Reed myself, and seeing many other shows brought in from California and the west coast generally, so that the Reed campus with Jim McGarrell became an exciting place. We shared a great deal in creating all of these activities and the benefits of these activities at Reed and the museum [school--Ed.].

I think also it might be mentioned that at that time we developed kind of a stronger collaboration between poets and artists. Jim McGarrell was very much oriented toward literature and poetry and his wife Ann was a poet, and there a number of people at Reed like Ken Hanson, who was a poet. So for the first time, I think both literary people, poets and writers made joint courses with visual artists. We ran poetry recitals and workshops jointly at Reed and the museum. Carolyn Kizer came down from Seattle and Dick Hugo came down, and there were many other people from Eugene and other places that became a kind of a nucleus, a core movement at that time developed.

And I remember that-- I can't remember the name-- [Zena, I'm sorry OR Zena ___sorri], which was a San Francisco literary magazine, a very good magazine, devoted a whole issue to what was going on in Portland. There were reproductions of paintings and poems written in conjunction with paintings. This was a very exciting period of time.

JANE VAN CLEVE: Wasn't this about the same time that Louis [Bunce--Ed.] painted the mural at the [Fleet Doughnut Shop--JVC] and the airport mural?

MICHELE RUSSO: Yes, Louis was very active at that time in the community. He was a very dramatic, controversial figure, and he was painting murals and doing what we would call public art at that time, like decorating a doughnut shop, decorating taverns.

JANE VAN CLEVE: This was in the mid fifties.

MICHELE RUSSO: Yeah. The Broadway Tavern, he did a number of murals there. And he was a very active and symbolic exponent of local contemporary art.

JANE VAN CLEVE: Wasn't there in Louis's aesthetic a kind of interest in combining media? Like didn't he paint to jazz?

MICHELE RUSSO: Yes, particularly jazz. He was very close to all the jazz musicians and maintained a lifetime kind of friendship, you know, with musical people, and in that sense he brought the musical world and the art world together.

JANE VAN CLEVE: Was there a reaction to that kind of mixing of media by some of the faculty members?

MICHELE RUSSO: I think everybody enjoyed it and participated in it. I think this was also a stimulus to a lot of organizational activity. I think there was a community consciousness that developed; we organized Artists' Equity because we were interested in creating an agency that could give a lot of attention to the community and also bring members of the community together. And it was interesting then at that time we also had collaboration between architects and artists who became very close to help join shows of art in architecture, and architects created commissions. There was a commission created by architects in the new Washington park. I remember Will Martin had just been out of school and did a mosaic for the park department.

JANE VAN CLEVE: This is when the Tom Hardy sculpture went into the Lloyd Center too, wasn't it?

MICHELE RUSSO: Yes, that was part of that, from that movement.

JANE VAN CLEVE: It's as if the late fifties anticipated what would happen in a more organized way in the late seventies.

MICHELE RUSSO: Yeah. All the architects were very enthusiastic, and they even opened their ranks to membership from artists.

JANE VAN CLEVE: I'd like to know more about Artists' Equity. When was that formed?

MICHELE RUSSO: That was in the very early fifties; I don't know exactly what year.

JANE VAN CLEVE: What was it supposed to do?

MICHELE RUSSO: Well, there was always a need for a professional organization that would make a study of the problems of the profession and that would create some kind of unity within the community and some impact on the community. I think they represented mostly what we did. We organized during that time public sculpture shows. We organized festivals: there were art festivals in the Park blocks, there were art festivals in conjunction with the Rose Festival, we had festivals at Laurelhurst Park, we had festivals at Holiday Park. And we created panels of speakers that brought people from the educational world, from Reed College particularly, architects and artists and poets together on a speaking platform.

JANE VAN CLEVE: Was there at that time concern for artists' rights?

MICHELE RUSSO: Very much so. As a matter of fact, the Oregon chapter of Artists' Equity was one of the most active and energetic nationally. And we raised the question of an ethical code for artists. The national office finally yielded and assigned this project to the Oregon chapter. We created the first ethical code for the artists' profession, which is reported as such by the New York Times, that this was the first time in the history of art that a code for artists had been created.

JANE VAN CLEVE: What kind of code? Was it concerning subject matter or fee or...?

MICHELE RUSSO: No. For example, the situation at that time was full of aesthetic hostilities that existed by one camp of artists against another camp of artists. We created a code of aesthetic nonpartisanship and complete freedom of expression, that artists should associate with each other in promoting aesthetic pluralism, and cooperating with each other in promoting this freedom of expression, and that they should not divide themselves into hostile camps on aesthetic philosophy, which did a great deal of harm to the artists, created a great deal of confusion in the communities and suspicion toward the aims of artists. I remember this as a very important point.

We also, for example, felt that the burden of exhibitions should not be shouldered entirely by artists, and we came out against entry fees. Entry fees were often justified on the basis that exhibitions could not take place unless the exhibited paid a fee for exhibiting. We felt that this was unjustified, that any exhibiting organization, the least it could do would be to pay for the expense of holding an exhibition. Artists maintained studios, paid for their canvases and materials, shipped their work, and this was already a sufficient burden on the artist. As a matter of fact, instead of assessing the artist a fee, we felt that the exhibiting group should pay the artist a rental fee and consider that the painting was in effect a loan and that they owed the artist some token obligation for lending his work. I think that we did a very good job in Oregon; I think Oregon museums until this day are relatively free from so-called jury shows that demand an entrance fee from the artist. I think Oregon also attempts to create some kind of compensation for the artist. I think, for example, Art Quake pays a token fee to every artist that exhibits. That's largely through this kind of idea and influence that we have had on the activities in this state.

JANE VAN CLEVE: Did the gallery system exist by this time?

MICHELE RUSSO: Well, Portland had very little gallery experience. Louis Bunce had maintained a gallery for a number of years called the Kharouba. But this gallery eventually disappeared; after years of gallant sacrifice in showing contemporary art and local art, eventually the gallery closed, and for a time there was no art gallery whatsoever. This created an enormous need. The artists felt the pressure to create a gallery and we came together with the idea of a cooperative at that time. I think many of the Equity chapters had organized cooperatives around the country, and so the idea came into being that we might be able to organize a cooperative.

And this is interesting, how Arlene Schnitzer got involved. Arlene Schnitzer knew the real estate situation here and she was a student at the school, and when she heard that we were looking for a location, she offered her assistance to us. We went around and looked at a number of places largely through her. In the course of doing this, I had a number of conversations with Arlene in which I kind of deplored the fact that we had to organize our own gallery and how nice it would be if some good person in the community, with business sense and ability, could undertake to underwrite a gallery for us. And a few days later Arlene announced to the community that she would open a gallery.

JANE VAN CLEVE: And that's The Fountain?

MICHELE RUSSO: And that's how The Fountain Gallery came into being. As a matter of fact, I remember at the last moment Arlene came to me and said, "What shall we call it?" My recommendation was...

[Break in taping]

MICHELE RUSSO: ...The Fountain Gallery. I was talking about naming it, the gallery. And Arlene came to me and said that a suggestion had been made to name the gallery The Sterling Gallery. (chuckles) And I was kind of upset by that. I said the least we can do is name it The Fountain Gallery. That was a very quick kind of suggestion because the gallery was located near the fountain, so that the most handy kind of name suggested itself that way, and so The Fountain Gallery came into existence. By the way, it was near the Skidmore Fountain too.

JANE VAN CLEVE: And then at that time, we didn't know we'd have so many famous fountains.

MICHELE RUSSO: (laughs)

JANE VAN CLEVE: We've become a city of fountains, you know. So it all worked out perfectly.

MICHELE RUSSO: Very well. It's a very nice name, I think-- a name that has all kinds of creative implications. (chuckles)

JANE VAN CLEVE: Once you have the gallery system though, you also have a clearer model for art as a kind of marketplace commodity. Did it introduce a kind of political competitiveness between artists, as to who would get represented and what prices would be and...?

MICHELE RUSSO: Well, it really didn't. I think that Arlene had a great many ideals about local artists and was closely associated with local artists, and I think that she showed a great deal of respect for whatever the local artist does. In my own case I've always felt that I was completely free to pursue my own direction in my work, and I think the work that's shown there in The Fountain Gallery has always had a great deal of diversity and reflects generally all the different directions that local artists happen to be interested in.

As a matter of fact, I think that's one of the interesting things about the Portland community-- and somebody, I think Jim McGarrell used to explain it-- that no artist exercises any influence over another artist because we associate with each other so closely that we all pursue our own independent direction. I think it's typical of this area, and I like to think of it as typical of the whole area in all respects-- political, social, as well as artistic-- that individuals do identify themselves in this area very much as personalities, and pursue their own direction regardless of what happens. I think what was nice about Portland is that it was so far away from New York, and that one could be here and be free of the kind of pressures that artists do feel when they're close to a scene where the market is so strong an influence.

JANE VAN CLEVE: What about the influx of easterners that began to happen after McGarrell, though, with Mel Katz, and Hal Jacobs?

MICHELE RUSSO: Well, Harold Jacobs and Mel Katz came together, as a matter of fact. The staff of the school felt that we should invite, from year to year, outside people who would bring here fresh experience and a fresh point of view. And this was very stimulating. It actually strengthened a great deal the influence of Louis Bunce, because the outside influences were mostly people who identified with the contemporary phases of art, like Mike Lowe, from New York, and Namo Ferruchio. They were exciting personalities here, and it was very helpful to have such personalities in the area. And Jacobs and Katz came here and joined the staff. Both were very articulate people very much interested in the affairs of the school and the museum and the community as well.

JANE VAN CLEVE: When the gallery system started and you began to have a more cosmopolitan viewpoint coming from the museum school, did the art museum maintain interest in local art?

MICHELE RUSSO: Well, originally the museum had very strong ties with the artists. I think the founders of the museum actually saw the museum as an institution for promoting contemporary art and for introducing what was going on in the contemporary world to the local community, which was in a sense kind of culturally divorced from the main centers of the nation where things were happening. So the museum had, I would say, a strong tradition of close cooperation with the artists, and since probably the strongest group of artists in the community actually worked at the museum school, the association already existed right there. Members of the [school] staff were very active in the museum, and the local artists were strongly represented. As a matter of fact, there used to be an artists' membership in the museum and a gallery actually operated by artists, called the Oregon Gallery, where Oregon artists showed their work within the museum on a regular monthly basis. I remember those days as rather ideal in terms of the relationship between the museum and the artist. But I think that kind of relationship somehow or other seemed to get weaker and weaker with each succeeding year, until eventually I think, particularly when the galleries were founded, the museum seemed to relinquish the idea that it was responsible for the local artist and saw the galleries as having that responsibility. So the museum more or less stepped out of the contemporary scene, and presumed that the artist would be satisfied through his gallery activities. And I think that marks a kind of division that has become more formal and more characteristic of the museum in our time.

JANE VAN CLEVE: Because the museum kind of stepped away from the local artist, did they simultaneously kind of step away from contemporary art, and was that the provocation for developing the Portland Center for the Visual Arts?

MICHELE RUSSO: Exactly, exactly. I think that the artists had for a number of years attempted to exercise some influence on the museum. There was a really strong feeling here that Portland suffered from isolation from the outside world and that we did not have as many opportunities as we should have to see the art that was being created nationally and even internationally.

[Tape 2, side 2]
[This tape side was accidentally overrecorded; MR and JVC later tried to supply the missing information--Ed.]

[Break in taping]

MICHELE RUSSO: ...and artists tried to influence the museum directly. For example, for a number of years we were successful in influencing the museum to bring distinguished juries from the outside there, and those became very important public events in the community and a way of maintaining contact with the outside world. So there's a whole history of personalities who came here largely through the suggestion of the artists. And the actual idea and proposal for PCVA [Portland Center for Visual Arts--Ed.] was formulated at first as a proposal for the museum, but I think we artists had had so many negative experiences with the museum that we eventually decided that the museum was not the organization to work through in order to bring about a PCVA program. That, as absurd as it might seem, we would be in a more positive position if we independently as a group of artists attempted to organize a program of activity that would bring contemporary art to the city of Portland, particularly the more experimental and controversial type of contemporary art.

JANE VAN CLEVE: Who were the people who organized the PCVA?

MICHELE RUSSO: Well, we discussed the theory of PCVA with a large group of artists. We could get no consensus of any kind and it seemed that we could not circumvent the difficulty, and so there were three of us: Jay Backstrand, myself, and Mel Katz. We decided that we would simply, through our own sense of cooperation and belief, organize PCVA.

Mel Katz at that time knew a Mr. Davis, who was the owner of the building where PCVA was presently located. He was very well disposed toward us and sympathized with the idea and allowed us to have floor space in the building, and that was an enormous incentive. Then we applied to the National Endowment [for the Arts--Ed.] and the National Endowment was so excited by our application and saw in our application a model which could be used nationally, and so they immediately favored supporting this organization in our behalf. And while we had no board or administration, we felt we had sufficient grounds to go ahead in organizing a Portland Center for the Visual Arts. We eventually were successful in bringing about a board and creating a staff and PCVA has filled a very important need in our city. I think most of the young artists rallied to it and many of the young people in the community welcomed the presence of such an institution. I think the museum itself also saw in PCVA a positive growth in the community and became a supporter.

JANE VAN CLEVE: Of course the challenge with something like PCVA is getting it off dependency on national grants, on getting local sponsorship. How did that come about?

MICHELE RUSSO: Well, we appealed to local foundations. And certainly I must say that the response of the Truman Collins Foundation (particularly through the influence of Mrs. Collins, who had been a student of mine at the school and who was a decisive voice) was very strategically important for us on the local level. They made it a matching commitment over a period of time, which gave us a lot of local strength and support of PCVA. But I think largely the National Endowment has been the main source of support. The PCVA has developed many activities of its own for meeting the needs of its budget.

JANE VAN CLEVE: It seems like it's become so expensive to even display art, you know, with insurance and travel costs. Does that seem a new wrinkle?

MICHELE RUSSO: Well, it is. It's not a new wrinkle; it's an old problem, actually. In our society support for the arts was always expected from private sources, and those private sources have either dried up or are no longer disposed and able to provide adequate funds for maintaining the museum and the art institutions of the country, though I think for the most part, all of the existing institutions are largely the product of the generosity of private individuals. But I think in the last few years there's been a growing consciousness nationally that the federal government itself should have some budget. Some people even believe they should have a ministry of fine arts like European governments do. European governments invest a large part of their budgets in the arts, and I think that feeling is becoming stronger and stronger here that the only way you develop any stability in the arts, that the government itself must make a commitment to it. And I believe that's absolutely so. I think the arts will thrive to the extent that the community-- and when I mean the community, I mean the representative of the community, which is the government. I think when the government sets an example and feels that the arts are important enough to have a substantial part of its budget go to the arts, then I think the arts will reach their level of acceptance in our country, which is normal and stable.

JANE VAN CLEVE: I wanted to bring up The Fountain fire, which was kind of an illustration of how expensive a disaster can be to the individual artist, as well as the community. You lost a lot of work in The Fountain fire. When was that?

MICHELE RUSSO: I'm not really very good at dates; I can't remember.

JANE VAN CLEVE: In the sixties, I guess.

MICHELE RUSSO: It's almost ten years, I believe, that the fire took place.

JANE VAN CLEVE: In the seventies, then [1977--Ed.].

MICHELE RUSSO: Yes, I lost about 60 paintings. Actually the losses were incalculable. There were so many works lost by so many people. The Fountain Gallery, fortunately, and unfortunately-- fortunately for us who were artists-- had a lot of space in the building available for storage and so a lot of us artists were utilizing this space. I had over a hundred paintings in the building. And of course a lot of the artists lost many, many paintings.

JANE VAN CLEVE: How do you get over something like that?

MICHELE RUSSO: I don't think you do. (chuckles) There's no way of getting over it; that was just an enormous disaster, and it was a very shocking disaster. It left a kind of a big hole in your own personal history. I probably lost the equivalent of five or six years' work in The Fountain Gallery fire. I think the fire shocked the whole community so that it seemed that following the fire, The Fountain Gallery received much more support and response from the community than they did previous to the fire.

JANE VAN CLEVE: As it made the news, and everybody suddenly realized how much went up in smoke.

MICHELE RUSSO: Yeah.

JANE VAN CLEVE: It just seems a tragedy to me, one of the big art tragedies of our history.

When did you become a public art commissioner?

MICHELE RUSSO: Well, I became an art commissioner after a history of active participation in the community. I had been instrumental in drawing up a bill for one percent for art in the state and I had been, I guess, conspicuously active in the community. For a moment there was a feeling that an artist should be on the Portland Art Commission, and I was appointed to be on the art commission at that time.

JANE VAN CLEVE: What did that role involve?

MICHELE RUSSO: That role presumably involved bringing directly into the commission the professional experience of the artist. I think that the commission always reflected the views of the friends of the arts rather than the artists themselves. And I think my being placed on the commission probably was a very energetic experience for the commission and certainly for myself.

JANE VAN CLEVE: Did you see some problems that were not necessarily bad problems but just problems when you had a [place on the] art commission?

MICHELE RUSSO: Oh, I do see a lot of bad problems actually. I think that the commission is, you might say, a token commission. It's very much underfunded; it receives only a very small fraction of the kind of funds it should have available. And I think the commission does not have the right ties with the artists and therefore reflects certain attitudes that are not really an outgrowth of direct experience in the arts. Probably the only real direct experience or impact that it has on the arts is through the one-percent program, and the one-percent program provides sums of money that are clearly specified for the use of art in public buildings.

JANE VAN CLEVE: I've always been privately worried about the way art gets categorized by government in the same section with mental health and welfare.

MICHELE RUSSO: Well, my attitude is that most of the people who are on our commission are much more sensitive to social welfare approaches and programs and see art as serving the purpose of social welfare. And while I think that's a worthy kind of cause, I think that brings about a great deal of misuse of the artist's talent as well as his work. I think that the most important thing in art is quality. There should never be any compromise with the quality of works of art. I think that the quality of works of art will be beneficial to any and all groups. The idea of creating therapeutic projects and using artists and art for such projects-- and large sums of money as well-- I think is really a misconception of the true mission that an art commission should have.

JANE VAN CLEVE: Well, I think it's very hard to [protect] a definition of quality because it can seem to vary from one person to another, but I wondered if the jury system, which is the usual system for public art selection, doesn't kind of invite the third choice being the winning choice. You know, two strong candidates split the vote, and the third one slips in.

MICHELE RUSSO: Well, the jury system largely prevails in the profession of art in our society. Presumably it's the only ethical way for spending public money. It has certainly its faults. As a matter of fact, many artists do not perform their best work on a commission basis. The best work of the artist is often created free from such preoccupations. I think commissions ought to consider buying ready-made work and not issuing these competitions, because when an artist works for competition I think his attitude becomes very complex and brings into existence all kinds of political and social considerations that often mutilate and transform what he

does, and I think that's very, very unfortunate. I think that the community should have the best work of the artist and the artist should be free from putting himself through the agony of considering what somebody likes or may not like.

JANE VAN CLEVE: Well, the other possible hazard is if the one percent for art program should start favoring that art that suits the architecture of the building or works as a kind of structural substitution. Is that a problem?

MICHELE RUSSO: Yes, I think that in the past the experience has shown that the money can be absorbed in what is called structural artistic things, which have no clear identity of their own, but become part of the structures. I think a lot of architects are inclined to think that way because they don't like to think of art having a separate function from their building. They would like to see an art that does not have a strong identity of its own, but blends in with the building like any good decoration might. At one time such art projects would be dissipated through the design of doorknobs and lamps and balustrades and other structural parts of the buildings so that in effect you really didn't have art. The tendency was to lean very heavily on the crafts and to lump the crafts with art.

JANE VAN CLEVE: I would think that the art that was more decorative would also be easier for the public to accept.

MICHELE RUSSO: Yes.

JANE VAN CLEVE: And that, without meaning to, you begin to corrode the notion of what good art is.

MICHELE RUSSO: Also I think there's a community concern and a shying away from controversy. I think one of the real merits of art is its controversial nature. And I think most people in public life really do not want to face any controversy, do not want to be involved in controversy, and are really fearful that art will provoke the hostility of the community. I think controversy is the greatest contribution that art can make. I think a work of art that is not controversial is a work of art that does not have any life. It must be a dead boring work of art that does not provoke people's curiosity and some discussion about it. I think actually the merits of art are precisely that.

[Break in taping]

JANE VAN CLEVE: How is your work controversial?

MICHELE RUSSO: Well, my work was controversial because it dealt with the figure and I think it's still controversial because I think the figure is a very controversial issue in our time. The fact that I paint nudes today creates some controversy and some embarrassment. Though people seem to enjoy the nudes, they have some embarrassment in identifying themselves with owning a nude or bringing a nude into their home. They feel uncomfortable. I think on the part of the public there's a general discomfort about the nude. It's very hard for people not to associate nudity with some kind of obscenity or some kind of pornography. So I think people are rather puzzled about their reaction to the nude.

JANE VAN CLEVE: Well, your figures are so present, but at the same time there's also qualities of awkwardness. You know, the pelvic area might be very dark and mysterious and...

MICHELE RUSSO: Well, there's I think an element of confrontation, the way I paint the nude, because it just puts the question before the person who's looking at it very directly of what [is] his attitude about the nude. Because the nude very boldly states what it is as a nude. It's sexual and it's real and ideal, and I think the audience finds it a challenge. So I think people are both intrigued by it and puzzled by it, causing some embarrassment.

JANE VAN CLEVE: Why was the figure controversial at the time that you decided to be a figurative painter? Was it your treatment?

MICHELE RUSSO: The figure was controversial because it happened at a time when aesthetically the country was tied up around the issue of modern art and abstract art. So the figure at that moment was identified with traditional realism, as I think it even is today. And since that was a moment of bitterness and of conflict in the struggle that abstract art was trying to establish its legitimacy at that time, there was a strong feeling between the figurative work and abstract work. Also I think abstraction has some kind of significance other than just being abstract in the twentieth century. I think in the twentieth century, the abstract has become very important because there is a certain dilemma about the human figure.

JANE VAN CLEVE: In real life.

MICHELE RUSSO: In real life. I think that some of the positive values that people had about human life have been lost, and in the twentieth century there is a real crisis around the role of the individual in our time. The role of

the individual in our time is threatened; it's doubtful. There's a great deal of cynicism as to the capabilities of the individual in solving problems. And there's some question even as to man's existence in the twentieth century and the significance of his existence. So that the figure itself is not only controversial in relation to the aesthetics of abstract art, but it's also very controversial on a philosophical and social basis. For that reason, I think there's a great deal of ambiguity about how does one respond to the human figure.

In the Renaissance, for example, the human figure was a heroic image. Man was visualized as an individual who could conquer the problems of the world, or who was big enough to face the problems of the world. In the twentieth century man has become a kind of an impotent individual in the largeness of our society. So I think there's a great deal of confusion as to how to identify the human figure.

JANE VAN CLEVE: But the impact of your paintings even when they make for a confrontation, there's also a kind of quality of innocence or vulnerability.

MICHELE RUSSO: That's right, because I feel very strongly about that. I don't see the human figure as having the heroic dimensions of the Renaissance. I associate that with a kind of academic outlook and interpretation of the human figure. Nor do I associate the human figure with some of the negative symbolism that has been given in the twentieth century. The human figure in the twentieth century often becomes a kind of mechanical composite and highly dehumanized. It becomes a very negative symbol and it is used as a critical symbol. I myself-- maybe it's because I still have faith in man (chuckles)-- would like to present the human figure in terms of our time but in a positive manner.

JANE VAN CLEVE: Well, I think you do.

[Break in taping]

JANE VAN CLEVE: I think your figure is positive, and I think that there's also a quality where the figure is sort of poised on a moment.

MICHELE RUSSO: Yeah.

JANE VAN CLEVE: It's that dramatic quality again, where you feel like something's going to happen in the next move. You also have a series of paintings involving men and women and I know you've been asked a million times why the men are dressed and the women aren't.

MICHELE RUSSO: Well, I think that has both some traditional significance. I think traditionally artists have used the female human figure to be a symbol, the figure has been a symbol of expressing a certain kind of idealism-- it's a symbol of poetry, a symbol of inspiration, a symbol of beauty. It's been used symbolically in a very valuable way, and I think probably mostly because artists are males and this is a reflection of their need to create these symbols that express some of their own impulses and feelings. I think the male figure was presented oftentimes heroically as a warrior (chuckles) and always had the dress and the apparel of the heroic individual. We find probably a predominance of nude women in art, but the male is dressed.

In my own thinking, I find that the dress is a kind of an armor and a facade. I really believe that people create facades and conceal themselves behind the facades. I think that the woman in her nudity is vulnerable, and that to me is very, very important. Vulnerability in our time is a very critical and very, very important aspect of life. Vulnerability probably means honesty, frankness and the ability-- and sensibility-- and I think the woman to be always in the nude, while the man not only turns out to be dressed but he's also a kind of a juggler and a performer. And so I see men and women kind of gaming with each other. I think that is an important aspect of the relationship between men and women, and I rather like that. I think that that's one of the last things that are left to people to do with each other! (laughs)

I also think that sexuality in our time is an important issue, that sexuality in the past has been very much discredited in many ways and identified with corruption and degeneration. I myself don't feel that way at all about sexuality and I would like to celebrate (chuckles) the importance of sexuality, because again I think if individuals have anything important in their relation to each other I think sexuality is a very important part of that relationship.

JANE VAN CLEVE: Often your couples look like they're kind of posing for somebody watching them. It reminds me of snapshots of people on the porch or people on the beach being photographed by an outsider.

MICHELE RUSSO: Because I think, the paintings are not something objective, but they are really in effect confrontations. I feel that I am engaged in a confrontation, and I think I am inclined to create an image which creates a confrontation with the onlooker, so that they are... This is kind of interesting. I think, for example, Manet's Olympia is one of the remarkable paintings of the world, because this nude woman does precisely that. I think it was that quality that provoked so much resentment toward the painting and Manet at the time, that this

woman just stood and defiantly looked at her audience and said, "Look at me. Here I am." (chuckles)

JANE VAN CLEVE: Um hmm, um hmm.

MICHELE RUSSO: And I think paintings are confrontations. Maybe it's out of this realization that the paintings have worked themselves out to more or less have that function.

JANE VAN CLEVE: The figures also tend to be pretty active-- you know, women kicking-- or even if they're in a state of repose, their arms are in odd positions and you'll sort of emphasize the awkwardness of the figure.

MICHELE RUSSO: Well, I'm interested in awkwardness, and I'm interested in the gesture. Since I do not paint figures that can be identified facially to certain specific characteristics, they are more or less identified through their movement, through their awkwardness. What they are doing is what tells you who they are. And so this awkwardness and this quality of movement has been very important. I think it's very important in modern art, I think in the Impressionists, and particularly an artist like Degas, who searched out aspects of the human being. He concentrated a great deal on what people did with their limbs, with their arms, with their hands, and was very much interested in conveying quality of life through these gestures and motions rather than the specific representational aspects of the human figure. As a matter of fact, he even gave them an animal-like kind of physical existence. I find that very, very engaging and I find I'm fascinated also by certain aspects of absurdity and contradiction, which I think are very valuable in life and I think that perhaps that is an attractive element that makes me pay more attention.

JANE VAN CLEVE: You said before that you always felt that the negative aspects offered the potential for creative...

MICHELE RUSSO: Yes, I have a sense that opposites belong together, that there can never be any real unity unless you put things which are in contradiction with each other. The word dialectics is used a great deal to describe that idea, that there is no really one way of life without the presence of the opposite. And actually, I don't think of them as opposites; I think of them as essential to each other. I think that's not only an important truth in life, but I think it also can be used in painting life.

JANE VAN CLEVE: Well, how do you teach this kind of thing? You know, this seems so wise. How does a student come to understand it?

MICHELE RUSSO: Well, it would be probably not so interesting if one knew exactly what one was to do in teaching. I think what is beautiful about teaching art is that a lot of very intuitive things take place in your teaching-- that you don't actually teach objectively or teach just facts, but you teach in a large measure by grappling with your students and feeling them out in a way that they don't even know themselves who they are. I think that's what's nice about art is that eventually the student must discover that what he does is really himself, in that he's not really just making art, that art is not a commodity that's to be produced.

I think too often in our time art is not really identified with individuality but has become a nice visual product that people learn how to do, and learn how to do very well. Fortunately, I think I was identified with a school that felt very strongly that you don't teach people how to paint, so that there was no predominant style or manner of working imposed on the students, but the students were put on the search looking for themselves. And that art was really self-revelation, a creative experience for the artists and not simply a productive method. I like to think that I helped people to discover themselves. Sometimes this is a very painful process because not everybody wants to know who they are. (laughter)

JANE VAN CLEVE: I'm sure that's true. You've been painting so long, but you've also seen the artist sort of change his relationship to the community. Now the small-business model seems to be the model that artists are picking up on as the government programs begin to shrink. Do you see hazards to that?

MICHELE RUSSO: Well, I don't know whether I understand completely your...?

JANE VAN CLEVE: Well, I think artists now are very aware that, as Truman Capote says, "A boy's gotta hustle his book." They're very aware of the fact that they have to sell.

MICHELE RUSSO: I think it is true that art is becoming popular in our time, and it's a commodity that's very much in demand. And I think that this has raised some questions. For example, there's no longer the division between the arts and the crafts. Because the crafts are very attractive to the public, craft has become itself very attractive to the artist. I think that sometimes this has created kind of a philosophical and aesthetic problem. I think that many artists confuse art with craftsmanship and practice art just as a craft.I think in a lot of the methods that are taught in school, instead of the artist or the student discovering themself, what we see is students being taught projects, and they do project after project. So that after a while they get involved in just a way of doing things and the possible skills that they can develop in doing these things. Now this is a kind of a

craft approach to art. Art is no longer self-revelation, but is the product of skills which are directed toward the market. The possibilities on the market are very great today and the popular taste is becoming an aesthetic aim for a lot of artists. Now we have, for example, Southwest art, we have Indian art, we have cowboy art, we have all kinds of art which is directed toward different sections of the public. And interestingly enough, a lot of artists are doing these things very seriously or they're doing them for what they consider legitimate objectives.

[Break in taping]

JANE VAN CLEVE: Well, how does an artist stay free of these trends? Like there's also fashion from New York too, isn't there?

MICHELE RUSSO: Yes, I think that the artist is now much more a part of society than he has been for several hundred years. I think artists were actually expatriates from society, and it was not unusual for the artist to leave his homeland and to go to Paris, for example, and live in what was a totally isolate world of their own in which their interest in art was more or less enriched and they saw themselves more or less at variance with the society in which they lived. Today this is no longer true. I think every artist now is educated in his own community and the majority of them are actually educated through colleges and universities. They are not separate from the social point of view and social orientation, but they are very much integrated into social orientation. For that reason it's not unusual that many artists think of art as a product. And they'll just be interested in brushwork. There seems to be a lot of trivial seduction to please the eye, and I do think that a lot of painting is really done to just please the eye. There's a kind of a sensuality that's very attractive to the eye, and stimulates pleasure on the part of people looking at painting so that oftentimes they're not even concerned about the subject matter--what the artist's trying to say; they just enjoy the sensual aspects of the color.

[Tape 3, side 1]

JANE VAN CLEVE: If artists are more worldly and in the world, is one reason for that that they're more self-conscious about needing to make a living and support themselves?

MICHELE RUSSO: That's right. I think that all of us come from a society that [directs] us to be practical in your attitudes about yourself, and making a living is the essential aim of all this practicality. I think artists are receiving the same education as anybody else, particularly if they do not go to art schools, which were an eccentric exception to the educational system, were independent of the educational system. If they go to universities and colleges, then they are trained to think just like schoolteachers, just like lawyers, just like doctors, just like any other member of society: they think of themselves as fulfilling the purpose of making a living and contributing to society whatever that society wants and needs. I think this is a very unusual point of view, that artists have never had before. In the last couple hundred years, artists always had a kind of unique background and their education was largely acquired through association with each other and through, I might say, eccentric means. They were extremely well educated people, but they were not educated through the conventional processes that one gets in the institutionalized educational system. And I think that kind of artist has more or less disappeared today.

JANE VAN CLEVE: We've discussed that art has been sort of "in." Do you think that more people are choosing to be artists than really should be artists or that aren't true artists?

MICHELE RUSSO: Well, I think as the idea of the artist being a practical individual with an ability to make a living, to do art for corporations, for banks, for the public becomes more popular, then more people are going to naturally do it. I think that at one time the ordinary individual was not attracted toward art, because he was not interested in being eccentric, or being a bohemian, or being an individual who was maladjusted, you might say, toward the social point of view, the idea of making a living. So I think there are many more artists today than there ever were in the past. I think a lot of people are attracted to art because they consider art no different than any other profession.

JANE VAN CLEVE: I think in all the arts, including literature, that one problem is the fact that we can know so many different literary traditions, so many different visual traditions, that you have a kind of eclecticism that offers imagery apart from the personal experience.

MICHELE RUSSO: But doesn't that become the greatest pressure for a writer-- to produce a Book of the Month? And does a writer get the kind of consideration that he deserves if he writes a book that does not seem to fall into that category of a possible Book of the Month or a possible script for a Hollywood film? I think that must be an extraordinary pressure today on people who are writers and in literature. For example, I think the poet is just completely out of it.

JANE VAN CLEVE: Um hmm. He is very isolated, except in his own group possibly. I think writing is hard in a way that ususually drums out people who are not very committed to it. I'm not sure if painting or printmaking has that difficulty to doing it that people would stop doing it when they weren't interested enough.

MICHELE RUSSO: Well, I like to think that, because I believe in negativism. I like to think that a man is by nature very perverse, and that he is going to run against the grain of things and precisely do the things that somehow or other are not necessarily rewarding or appreciated by other people. I think there will always be people who have that kind of perversity. In the arts, I think we have a long history of this type of perversity. I think we do in science. As a matter of fact, I think that is the creative spirit. The creative spirit is largely based upon the idea of discovering that which somehow or other is unacceptable and dealing with things which are unacceptable to other people. And I think that the human being is by nature inclined this way. I don't always think that the human being is most typical in the majority. I think the minorities are more significant than majorities, and I think the history of mankind is largely a product of the efforts of minority groups. I think scientists, poets, artists, writers, all creative people, have always been minority people. They have left their imprint on society because they were those people who had the courage and the grim determination to deal with that which is new, and that which is new, I think, is certainly most essential.

JANE VAN CLEVE: That's difficult to do. Do you think that newness will get a particular character region by region? I mean do you think that simultaneously to searching for the new, you're also working with an aesthetic that might be local?

MICHELE RUSSO: Well, newness is a terrible thing, actually. Because in our time there are business elements who have discovered the importance of what is new, so that newness itself has become a product for promoting things. All kinds of cheap, shabby items are promoted simply as new on the market, and the public also has developed a fashionable taste for everything that's new-- a new-model car, a new dress, a new... Everything that's new somehow or other becomes attractive in itself. So newness has lost, really, its positive nature, where it was identified with creativity. I think newness has become really a slogan for business.

JANE VAN CLEVE: Well, that's why I mentioned eclecticism, because I think that one way that people try to be new is to borrow forms from another culture that happen to be unfamiliar to ours, and then that becomes a kind of [consumering] too.

MICHELE RUSSO: Well, I think aesthetically this represents quite a problem, because the word new is being used in art too in the same way as it's used in our society, that anything that's new is acclaimed. Where one time the word avant-garde, for example, did not necessarily mean the individual was doing something new, but an individual was discovering something vital. The new was identified with that which is vital. Today new is often identified with that which is different and that which is sensational, and therefore I think there's a great deal of confusion as to what is the function of newness. As a matter of fact, historically that which was new always promised a better life, but today in the twentieth century that which is new has come under suspicion a great deal. A lot of people are fed up with newness, and it's interesting that there's a powerful nostalgia for the past and for that which is old. I think people are becoming collectors of antiques-- never was the antique as much in demand as it is now. There seems to be a kind of a revulsion to newness and a turning back toward a stage of life that people had a tendency to idealize. So newness itself has become a critical issue and no longer the dependable goal that it was at one time. As a matter of fact, I think politically and socially people, for example, are very fearful of the newness of the atomic energy, because they see in newness threats. They even lost their faith in science and see that newness does not seem to offer any more the promise of a future, or seems to present us with all kinds of dilemmas.

JANE VAN CLEVE: It seems to me that the artist in the world, who has to support himself and who may get federal grants or may get private clients and business or whatever-- it like those realities also force a safety, you know. For example, a bank isn't going to choose a painting that is too disturbing. I mean, maybe I'm wrong.

MICHELE RUSSO: Yes, I think it establishes certain styles, certain trends. I would say very definitely that a lot of things nowadays carefully avoid subject matter, no matter how they are painted, whether they use figure or abstract. Subject matter is a disturbing element and paintings do not sell if they have subject matter that creates some difficulty in our understanding or our inacceptance. I think you find that the most popular kind of painting is that which has nothing much to say but is visually attractive and pleasant.

JANE VAN CLEVE: Well, I can see that the people buying a painting for their living room, or people buying a painting for the bank lobby, or a jury deciding a sculpture for a public place, that all three groups are going to steer away from the terrible, even though terrible is that negative edge that you feel confronts us with a frontier of some sort.

MICHELE RUSSO: Well, there's something good about that, something bad. Paintings are visual things and should be enjoyed visually, but paintings also I think can be means for communicating to ourselves who we are. And I think when they begin to do that they become so complex that people have no patience with them.

JANE VAN CLEVE: Yeah. I remember talking to Robert Bly, who thought that the tradition in both art and poetry was very cheerful, and that the cheerfulness was a mask for a kind of terror about sexuality. So he took it right

back to sexuality, as you discussed previously.

MICHELE RUSSO: Yes.

JANE VAN CLEVE: It's all very interesting. (chuckles)

[Break in taping]

JANE VAN CLEVE: Well, I suppose people who are not artists assume that artists do what they do easily. But it sounds like that's not the case.

MICHELE RUSSO: Well, that's a question I often get asked, about how much fun it must be to be an artist. I don't think that is really a question that's based on any degree of understanding. I think the artists work very painfully. As a matter of fact I think what the artist really does draws from a huge reserve of fears, anxieties, maladjustments, all kinds of emotional experiences, which are often unfortunately considered negative experiences in our society-- the kind of experience that most people wish to avoid. I think these are very important energies that the artist uses to create his work. I think if he's going to create anything new then he's going to reveal to us who we really are, and if he doesn't have the courage to face all of these so-called negative experiences that are rejected by people, then he really has nothing much to say except to make something beautiful. Particularly in today's world, I think there are a lot of things that one needs to question, one needs to think deeply about, that one cannot accept the assurances that we get on the surface of things. And there's a degree of alienation; people are not only alienated from each other but they feel that they are alienated from some kind of meaning, that life doesn't have the kind of fulfillment and meaning that they think life should have. They are turning to all kinds of outlandish cults and beliefs and practices and drugs, largely looking, making, searching for meanings. Well, the artist doesn't have to do these things. He's got a storehouse within himself of all kinds of difficult experiences and emotions, and he also has sources of positive vitality. If he has this, he has something to work with. If he does not have this, then he really doesn't have the kind of vital energy he needs in order to create an art that has impact and meaningfulness.

JANE VAN CLEVE: Is there the possibility, when an artist is probing his own terrors and his dark side, of getting so private that he no longer speaks to the rest of us in the way that Orozco, say, was able to speak to the rest of us.

MICHELE RUSSO: Maybe it seems that way. Nobody is that private, actually. As a matter of fact the more private you are, probably, the more you're like other people. I think a person like VanGogh, for example, was an extremely private individual and I think it was very painful for people to look at his work. Not very many people saw his work and he was a widely rejected artist. But I think that kind of privacy now has become everybody's world. I think everybody recognizes this privacy and sees the image of the kind of world they've been carrying around. It has lost the sting and the difficult character that it had at a time when acceptance was very difficult. Now VanGogh is not looked upon as an eccentric individual, as a very private individual. He's actually become a very important public figure. I think that when you reveal the inner workings of man, you're really revealing what we all are, what everybody is. And therefore a public service is actually performed by the artist in doing this. Many artists in their own time are not acceptable or very well known, but time eventually proves that they are public people performing works which are of wide interest to the public.

JANE VAN CLEVE: One thing that's bothered me, Mike, is the fact that an artist develops... In his own process he has a beginning, a middle, and an end. There's a way in which the accumulation of work makes for the whole statement, but the way we have to encounter that work in the world is that it's in all these private homes, or in many different cities, or lost in a fire, and so we don't get to have the complete viewpoint. You know, it won't be in a single painting. And I think that must be kind of frustrating for the artist.

MICHELE RUSSO: Well, that's very frustrating because I think we are very fragmented. And I think consciousness and awareness comes with time, and does not exist completely within one work of art. It's the total works of art that reveal the kind of path a man has traveled-- where he started and where he is going eventually. And that's why, I suppose, museums are important, why public art is important, and exhibitions are important-- the idea of bringing the works of a man together so that they can be scrutinized as a, in their totality, rather than looking at one individual work. I would say that art is really in its nature public and universal, and that it belongs to everybody and all of the work should be available to everybody. Because otherwise, understanding becomes very, very difficult.

JANE VAN CLEVE: I think you're kind of unique, speaking about the artist as a public figure, because you've also been willing to be the artist as citizen as well as the artist as poet. You've gone down to the planning commission meetings and you've externalized the same attitudes that might be in your painting into the world and made change. Do you feel that that's a dangerous thing to do?

MICHELE RUSSO: Not at all. I feel like I'm often reproached by people for doing this sort of thing. But as an activist in early life, I achieved a certain integration with society and I shared all the problems of society, and

this is actually what I am. I'm a very public person, and I'm also a very private person as an artist. I don't think there's any conflict between the two. I'm able to reconcile one with the other very, very well. As a matter of fact, they are essential to each other. I'm not a public person who goes out to do public things in order to benefit other people. I do whatever I do because of my own inner impulses and necessities. I do them as an egotist. I need to do them not for other people, but for myself. I have that kind of background. I don't see a conflict between my work and what I do in a public way. I think both of them are an expression of who I am and very essential to myself.

JANE VAN CLEVE: Well, as we sit here in your studio, I look at the drawing table that has about 2,000 drawings. We haven't talked about your drawings, but I have looked at them, and I know that you have drawings of nudes that reflect a kind of private inquiry, but you also have drawings of people in groups, clothed, often with amputated or foreshortened limbs, who seem to be the social figures, you know, the figure kind of maimed in the world.

MICHELE RUSSO: I have a great deal of social consciousness and I feel that social consciousness in all of my work, whether they are nudes or not nudes. I don't feel this peculiar discrepancy that so many people seem to have a problem with, that you have to make some direct reference to some social problem to make a political statement. To me, everything is politics. I think every single aspect of life is politics. So therefore, I don't see the necessity for making what I consider oftentimes very obvious stereotyped comments of a political nature. I think even sex, which is the most private thing in the world, is one of the most political social issues of our time. I don't see this peculiar division. I realize that within the society which tries to divide life into areas, what people call a positive and a negative, and what at one time was called the evil and the good-- that's a kind of a Christian tradition and a Western tradition, where the world is divided in two different parts. I don't see these divisions and I never have engaged myself in that kind of practice.

JANE VAN CLEVE: It seems like you've had a very fully expressed life. Are there things that you would have done differently?

MICHELE RUSSO: I have no idea. I actually have a real fear that if I would live my life over I would do exactly (chuckles) the same thing all over again. (laughs) So I have actually no desire... (laughs)

JANE VAN CLEVE: ...to even look at the question, because of your fear that you'd do it exactly the same way over again. Well, you're very interesting because you've been such a powerful universalist and at the same time very much committed to this local place-- to Portland and the art agencies here, and the art scene here. And right now you've got another bee in your bonnet, which is the contemporary gallery. You want to talk about that?

MICHELE RUSSO: Well, I like to be where I am, because that's where my life is, where I am. I identify myself very quickly with the environment in which I exist. I'm very much part of a community, and I'm also very dedicated to the idea that art is a part of life, and I see a strong tradition of estrangement between the arts and the community and the society. So naturally a lot of my energies are devoted toward trying to create a society and an art which live in a state of reconciliation with each other and a state of harmony with each other. Because I think the community needs the arts to help develop its self-awareness, and the artist needs the community because he needs to have his efforts confirmed as worthwhile efforts. So this is my key, I guess, or my approach to my life and to the communities in which I live. For example, I think Portland for a long time was a provincial kind of community, largely because it was, you might say, a pioneer community and a community very much removed from the larger urban centers of America. As far as the arts were concerned, it was often very difficult to bring what was going on in the country nationally to Portland, so that Portland was often culturally divorced and isolated from what was going on. And I have always felt this is an important aspect of the needs of the community, and have always been interested in creating opportunities that have the kind of vitality the community needs to see things which are done elsewhere. This is one reason why I was very much interested in the Portland Center for the Visual Arts, was very much interested in abstract art, and now am very much interested in what I think is a great necessity here, which is to bring together a large collection, a coherent, organized collection of contemporary art, which would be available to the community, and particularly to the young people. I think that would be a great step forward and a great asset to the community.

JANE VAN CLEVE: A kind of MOMA for Portland, a Museum of Modern Art? Well see, there you go, you always are giving yourself-- and us-- new projects that involve problems and funding and everything else. You just goad us on, on, on.

MICHELE RUSSO: Well I don't know; I like to think of it as just egotistic impulses. (laughs)

JANE VAN CLEVE: But you manage to get it done. I mean I've seen this happen. You plant the seed and then you...

MICHELE RUSSO: Well, I never stop trying (chuckles), let's say that.

JANE VAN CLEVE: I wanted to ask you something which was an impression I receive. In Seattle there is a great deal of enthusiasm for the arts: they have a couple of museum settings and they are working for a third museum setting. Sometimes I've suspected that Portland has a kind of Darwinian notion that survival through struggle results in a better product. You know, that there's a sort of an attitude of "prove it." Do you think that there's something to that?

MICHELE RUSSO: Well, it's kind of a pioneer attitude. It's an attitude that says "slug it out," and if you come out, you're the better for it. I think Seattle is much more an urban community, and I think Portland is struggling to achieve that level of urbanism. Because Seattle has more, it can also convey a more sophisticated sense of what it wants to represent. I think Seattle is a more cosmopolitan center than Portland is, because it's a larger city. But I thought that something at least in the recent history of Seattle was a very important contributing influence on this attitude about the arts, and that was the World's Fair, which was held a number of years ago in Seattle [1961-62--Ed.]. I think that Seattle discovered the importance of the arts on that World's Fair, and has never forgotten that lesson, of how art played such an important role in creating that fair. Ever since that time Seattle has tried to integrate art and culture into the community. It's no longer just a fair, but it's an everyday need that the city of Seattle has discovered, that the arts have a great deal to contribute to the community. I think in Portland the same process is happening but it hasn't happened so dramatically and with such impact as happened in Seattle.

JANE VAN CLEVE: Would you like to see more exchange between the two cities in terms of the visual arts?

MICHELE RUSSO: Very, very much so. Because I think we have a great deal in common, and when we talk about Northwest art, we are not only talking about what goes on here, but what goes on in Seattle and what goes on even in British Columbia. In the past we have created situations where there has been that kind of exchange, and artists have visited these communities and tried to create or stimulate a more dynamic exchange between the communities. That seems to be very difficult, but maybe one day we will achieve this.

JANE VAN CLEVE: Well, if the artist is more in the world, and he's more concerned with art as an object or product that has to be sold, is there then more competiveness that begins to surface, one artist competing with other artists?

MICHELE RUSSO: I think we struggle between competitiveness and association. In other words, being isolated from each other and associated. The Portland artist has always had a long history of association, and we have attempted to create association with San Francisco and Los Angeles and Seattle. I think the competitiveness that isolates the artist is not very good. I think the artist needs the stimulus of being in the community that gives him energy, rather than isolating himself as an individual. I think that the west coast, for example, is emerging as a powerful force independent from New York. I think the west coast has a lot of regional strength and regional creativity that distinguishes it from what goes on any other place in the country. I think the very process of creativity is very much related to the kind of environment in which it exists, that you draw a great deal of your strength, a great deal of your creativeness, a great deal of the complexes of your mind and your emotions from your environment, and I think we on the west coast have not really fulfilled that. But to the degree that we've become aware of who we are, I think we are building up a west coast movement.

JANE VAN CLEVE: I'm right away wondering if there wouldn't be a difference between the art coming out of the sunny part of California and the art that comes from San Francisco on up, if you wouldn't have two different kinds of aesthetics going on.

MICHELE RUSSO: Well, we probably do, and we have. I think California art is certainly different from the Northwest art. There's a lot of funk art in California that's become practically a tradition and a movement, where we don't see that much evidence of that kind of art in the Northwest. Portland and Seattle have been more or less reflecting the great things, the great influences of things that have happened in the Northwest. For example, [Mark--Ed.] Tobey and [C.S.--Ed.] Price and [Kenneth--Ed.] Callahan, and... That group seemed to represent a movement that had some coherence, and oftentimes that kind of quality seemed to have an Orientalism, seemed to be directed more toward the Pacific rather than to Europe, Europe being a point of view. Whereas the New York art was not only urban and cosmopolitan, but also had a strong window turned toward Europe, we don't have that window here on the west coast. That window here is toward nature and toward maybe the Asiatic, which is the natural aspect of our culture. We have a strong Asiatic community anyhow on the west coast.

JANE VAN CLEVE: Well, when you came to the museum art school in 1947, painters like Price and Tobey had created what you probably would call a landscape tradition. Were you once again alone, being a figurative painter?

MICHELE RUSSO: I was very much so at that time. Much more so than now kind of an exception. I was an outsider and I felt very conscious of being an outsider. I was not dismayed by it. I realized that I had even

European moods, and that I had an entirely different background from everybody else. So I was not so much dismayed as concerned with bringing this new attitude to here.

JANE VAN CLEVE: I know there are figurative painters like William Cumming and Michael Spafford in Seattle, and we have George [Johanson--JVC] and Jack McClarty here, and I suppose Jack Portland would be considered figurative. But do you think it's still predominantly a landscape tradition?

MICHELE RUSSO: Well, I think actually the abstract movement is predominantly a landscape-- the landscape is urban New York. And here it's nature. I think that particularly the American abstract movement-- I think America has always been oriented toward nature, because we have a tradition that's so close to the pioneer period. The pioneers of our country lived in a state of nature and very close to nature. Nature was always formidable as well as promising and visually astonishing, and so nature's always played an important part in the point of view, so that in American painting we really don't have a great figurative tradition.

JANE VAN CLEVE: Except in advertising and, you know, if you were going to be playful...

MICHELE RUSSO: Well, it's that we developed our urban centers. I think the figure has become more and more frequently apparent in the arts.

JANE VAN CLEVE: Are you glad that you're a Northwest artist?

MICHELE RUSSO: I feel very adjusted here (chuckles) in the Northwest. I don't question myself as to whether I am a Northwest artist or not a Northwest artist. I feel that I live in this region, I love this region. I think this: if I have anything in common with the region, I think I have a kind of idealism which I see in the region. I see [it] in nature, I see it in the environment, and I see it in the people. And so I feel a very strong regional identification. I have strong regional feelings.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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