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Oral history interview with Fletcher Benton, 1989 May 2-4

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Fletcher Benton on May 2, 1989. The interview took place in San Francisco, CA and was conducted by Paul Karlstrom for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

FLETCHER BENTON: FLETCHER BENTON
PAUL KARLSTROM: PAUL J. KARLSTROM

[Tape 1, side A; all tapes are 30 minutes per side]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Fletcher, it is a pleasure to sit here with you, to learn more about you and about your work. We're sitting in a rather wonderful structure, a combination home/studio that you built over a period of years, absolutely gorgeous. And you've been also generous in making this space available for special events, including for the Archives members. So I'll go on record right here as thanking you and Bobby for that. We've known one another for quite a while, and this is a marvelous opportunity then for me to ask questions through which I'm going to get to know you better. Above all, the thing that strikes me is that you, as a painter but particularly as a sculptor, have produced a distinguished and fairly visible—in terms of scale certainly—body of work. No question about this. You have this wonderful studio, you certainly have, you're known in the art world, you have contacts—and I don't mean just in the Bay Area—you have contacts, and yet somehow I feel that you and your work aren't as well known as they might be. Now there certainly must be reasons for this. And these are some of the things that I would like to pursue. Kind of examine the situation, say why is this the case? Regionalism, the fact that you've chosen to work, live and work, in San Francisco, may be one of the issues involved. But as I was thinking about doing this interview, certain questions emerged. And one of them is who is Fletcher Benton? It's a familiar name, but who is Fletcher Benton? How does he and his work fit into developments here in the Bay Area, and beyond that in American art, international art in general, over the last few decades? I'm really interested in getting to know you, and therefore your work, a little better. We were talking earlier and you said that you felt, in a way, that you had suffered through the damage inflicted by regionalism, that this is a factor that has an effect on artists' work and certainly on yours. And then you also said you felt that to a certain degree you were a victim of a regional dealer. And I wonder what you mean by that? Why do you feel this way?

FLETCHER BENTON: Well, in all fairness, the suffering has not been something I couldn't handle. It's been, it's been a little bit a sideline view of a game that seems to be going on on the East coast that isn't played out here, and. . . . I came to California by a flip of the coin. Truly. After I'd graduated, standing out in front of the school, flipped a coin with a friend of mine, and we headed west, largely because I'd been in the service here, and otherwise it wouldn't even have been a consideration. I came out here not realizing I was going to stay. I have stayed here for 30 or 35 years.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What year did you arrive?

FLETCHER BENTON: I arrived here in 1956, so that's 33, 34 years. And, but to answer your question, yes, I think anything outside of New York suffers from regionalism. Certainly if this were New Orleans or St. Louis, or Kansas City, Kansas, the damage of regionalism would be a lot greater than it certainly is in Los Angeles or San Francisco. But the very fact that New York still holds all the marbles, and they still look at the rest of the country as the frontier, and the power and control of the dealers in New York—they don't want to relinquish any of that control to anyone else. And suddenly the West coast presents a threat very much now to the selling of American art. But in my case I'm perfectly happy on the West coast. I love it here. I've raised my children here. My lifestyle here has been bearable. I've been able to do things outside of New York in terms of space, equipment, heavy-metal deliveries, and using heavy steel that I could never have managed certainly in New York. And there's been a sense of freedom here that puts pressure upon artists who go to New York. You can go to New York as a free soul and very soon realize that you aren't going to make any difference at all unless you conform to what New York is, what they expect of their artists, what the dealers expect of the artists, what the mold is of the artist. I mean, you go there as one person, but if you're going to make any difference at all, you definitely can leave New York as another person. I mean, it's a controlling place. I've been there. I've had a studio there. I saw all the warning signs. And I am a very stubborn Welshman. I was not going to give into that. I mean, it was not something that I was willing to sacrifice for. I just felt—maybe it was an insecurity that caused me to leave—but I just wanted to get the hell out of there, and find my place, be left alone and do my stuff. The question, however, you asked me was how has this affected me now that I'm 58 years old, in terms of people hearing my name, or looking at my work, making some sort of aesthetic judgment. I wanted to give you that background in order to answer this question. I think it's hampered me a lot, especially in northern California, where I have not

fit it, never did fit in, and will never fit in. It is my residence only. I don't fit the image here that I was just speaking of in New York, except out here it's a more timid thing. You know, it was the funk art; it was the figurative school. But that was a very timid thing; it was not an all-encompassing sledgehammer like it is in New York. So to answer your question, I'm hoping that through this, through some things that will be going on in my life, that there will be more exposure to what I'm doing. I'm known in New York as a kinetic artist, as maybe one of the ten kinetic artists in the world that were working in the late sixties, and that's been a long time ago, but they still know me as a kinetic artist. [chuckles] I've had no growth to them. Their minds have been closed to that, because when I had a New York dealer, that's where they last saw me: doing kinetic art, showing at the Galeria Bonino on West 57th Street, right in the center of all the activity there. And regionalism constrains an artist's opportunity for the rest of the world to know what he's doing, and that is the damaging aspect of regionalism.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Do you feel that you—you uniquely here in the Bay Area, or at least as part of a small group—have been victimized by this regionalism? What I mean to say is that, from what you just said, you had the disadvantages of working in a region, working in the Bay Area, without some of the advantages that accrue, and those advantages ironically are part of the look of a region. A whole group of artists then will be put together and there is interest in them because their work and their interests match a view, often from New York, of what the Bay Area is like, whether it be funk. . . . I would agree with you. Just looking at your work. . . . I would never point to you and say, "Ah! San Francisco artist. Bay Area artist." But I would probably look at you and say, "If it's a Californian, he looks more like a Los Angeles art[ist]." We'll get into that. But do you feel that you've sort of doubly suffered. You've elected to be in the Bay Area, to be based out of the Bay Area—you do have a well-known dealer—so you've been here and given up a few things by not having a contact or residence in New York. You also, because of the nature of your work, don't match. So you're not going to be noticed then for those qualities that are part of the area. Double out. Twice odd-man out. Is that a fair. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: That's fair. I think all artists suffer from regionalism. But let's say that outside of New York everything else is regional.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

FLETCHER BENTON: Unfortunately. So we all. . . . Suffer's a tough word; maybe that's too strong. We all get a little tarnished by that. In my case, which has happened to a few artists, I was going along at the age of 33, 34, trying to find out who I was, and all of a sudden became interested in kinetic art, not because it was kinetic art, but because I was looking for a way to take my painting, to express my painting in another way. So I was using motion for that. It never occurred to me that there was a big kinetic movement going on in Europe and South America. So all of a sudden I was swept into an international thing that was going on. It was instantaneous notoriety. With that, I had a very strong New York representation. I was even with Knoedler's for a short time—very, very short time. But I was with Galeria Bonino and they had Paul Burri briefly, they had Ron Mallory, they had Nam Jun Paik. They had several South American artists, DeMarco, and they showed Otto Pienes, some Otto Piene things, and some of the German and Italian artists, kinetic people. So I had, in my thirties, this strong representation in New York. Then when I stopped doing kinetic art—by choice, I felt I'd gone as far as I wanted to go with it—I stopped completely making it and went ahead to deal more strongly with other concerns, such as what was the third dimension all about. I was perfectly aware that regionalism was going to be a strangling set of handcuffs that I hadn't had before. Because when I was in New York, it didn't matter where I lived. I could have been living in. . . . I mean, no one ever asked, "Where does he live?"

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

FLETCHER BENTON: Or where he's from. You know. It was never even something they were concerned about, because there I was, very much in New York.

PAUL KARLSTROM: They probably assumed, actually, that you were a New York artist.

FLETCHER BENTON: Exactly. I've had so many people shocked to find out I lived in San Francisco, of all places. Of all places.

PAUL KARLSTROM: [chuckles]

FLETCHER BENTON: So I knew very well that the chance of me having the exposure after I got out of kinetic art, and living here, was very slim. Most New York people know my name. [But] they have not the foggiest idea what I've been doing since 1972. They still think I'm fiddling around with kinetic art. It's true. And that is where I think regionalism has been frustrating for me. If I hadn't had that burst of recognition when I was very young, and attached to a certain movement, I may have been, like so many other artists, a victim of regionalism forever. I mean, at least I was out of it for a while, then returned to it. And where I am today, most people are not that aware of. At least on the West coast they are, but back East and Europe not so much. That's okay. I mean, I'm old enough now that all that New York glitz doesn't make any difference to me. I don't need it. If it comes my

way fine; if not, big deal. I'm doing well here. I have the freedom to do what I want, and I have the freedom of choice here. And I never felt I would have had the freedom of choice in New York under any circumstance. And the guys who were my age that made it big there moved. Many of them are in Santa Barbara now. Many of them went on up into Vermont and what have you. They got the hell out of New York because it's a killer place.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, I was gonna ask you—you said that you actually spent some time in New York, and I forget if it was a couple years on one occasion, one or two years, is that right?

FLETCHER BENTON: It was less than a year.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay. And when was that?

FLETCHER BENTON: It was in 1960.

PAUL KARLSTROM: All right. You mentioned that you saw the danger signs, I think is the way you put it, and then consciously made a decision to separate yourself from New York. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . and so many other artists feel obliged to participate, to live there, to work there. You gave it a try and then you said, "Whoa! Wait a minute. I see things that I don't want for me," and what were they. . . ?

FLETCHER BENTON: You know, in my case, let me say this, I think every artist that goes to New York has a choice. You either stay there and conform and tolerate the pressure that inevitably is put on you or you leave there and remain somewhat free. And to me I just wasn't willing to give anything up to stay in New York. That's not the way I do things.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What did you see happening that worried you, that you didn't want to participate in? What was going on with some of the other artists, or with the art world itself, that gave you pause?

FLETCHER BENTON: The New York school was on a train leaving town.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Uh huh.

FLETCHER BENTON: You know, it was definitely on the way out. Stella and the whole new group were coming in. I got there just as Pop Art and all that stuff was, you know, coming up from under the ground, sprouting, and. . . . I felt such surges in New York. I felt it getting on the bus; I felt it going to museums. I felt a panic [power—Ed.] in New York, a surge. People refer to it as the energy in New York.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Um hmm.

FLETCHER BENTON: Well, yes, it is; it's certainly energy. People are going somewhere. Everybody's moving fast. But I think it was dangerous for me. Those were the flags. I knew that I had to adjust to the energies that were there, and the adjustment meant compromise, and I wasn't willing to do that. I just simply wasn't willing to live in some awful place, and schlep my stuff up and down five flights of stairs, and freeze my ass off in the wintertime, and get hit in the face with slush, and deal with the humidity in the summer. Because I grew up in Ohio. I'd already, I knew all about that stuff.

PAUL KARLSTROM: [chuckles]

FLETCHER BENTON: And on top of that, to have to change my personality, to have to change my freedom of choice to deal in certain areas that I knew had to be a part of the next wave. . . . I'll just interrupt myself for a moment. I gave a criticism, you know, at Columbia [University] two years ago in the graduate program there. I had over thirty students. I spent two or three days visiting studios, talking to these people. And what I felt in 1960 I saw in 1986 at Columbia, or 1987 in the students. Complete dishonesty, in my mind. That these students, as graduate students, at Columbia, in art, were trying to find out what would sell in New York. And I don't mean sell for the buck, but sell for the image. I didn't see one honest student. They were all jockeying at the start of the horse race to get in a good position to the rail, to win the race.

PAUL KARLSTROM: How could you tell that?

FLETCHER BENTON: Well, when you've taught for 22 years, you can.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I mean, was it in the critiques of the work, the work itself said that to you. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: The work itself.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . or the questions that they asked you, or what?

FLETCHER BENTON: It was. . . . Out of those 30 or so people, I would say maybe three or four of them were trendy. There were a couple Westermanns there, working in wood. There were some paper and string people. There were a couple of junk people who were working with coat hangers that they found down on a street corner. It was all somebody else, and it was all trying to deal with the shock factor that seemed to get attention in New York. [chuckles] But so many of them were dealing with rehash, you know. And those that weren't were trying to find out what would click. What would get, what would be, what would be this year's fashions in art. You know, what's gonna noticed this year. What's gonna get in the New York Times. What's gonna get mentioned. It was all that Andy Warhol dealt with, and it's all that Ultra Violet wrote about in the book, Famous for 15 Minutes, about Andy Warhol. You read that book, you know what the art energy is in New York. And you either fall into that formula and do whatever you can to get noticed in New York—and I consider that dishonest. Because we are what we are, and as artists we must work to develop who we are. We don't manipulate ourself to fit in to a situation that we hope will get us known to the public through the press. And that's the dishonesty that I'm talking about. And I think we can thank Mr. Warhol for leading so many minds to think that everybody's going to be able to pull that off.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But is it the idea that the look, the image, is in fact the substance, so that there's no difference between the two, and if you could capture the look then you'll succeed? Is that part of it?

FLETCHER BENTON: If you could capture the attention, you will succeed.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, and you do that through the look of something.

FLETCHER BENTON: Through the shock of it all, through being noticed. I mean, however you want to do it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What about here? Do you find with the. . . . You've taught, oh, a good number of years, I think, at San Jose State, and you've obviously had a lot of contact with students, and you even have students assisting you here at the studio. Do you find then a fundamental difference between the younger artists, students, from here in the Bay Area specifically, but outside of New York. . . . Or do you find that some of those same aspirations and desires are there?

FLETCHER BENTON: They're the same here. Largely because, you know, the way communications are. We've got art magazines all over the place. We've got specials on television. No, they know what's going on.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: Now something that didn't happen to me in school, but I've seen it happen to so many students. I used to teach at the [San Francisco—Ed.] Art Institute, and it happened there as well. You've got the students who are extremely aggressive, and they try to find out what it's going to take to make it. And they become aware of certain things that they have seen that have made it for other artists, and they work toward those goals. And in the process I think they lose their identity. Yes, definitely, you have that out here. Most of the New York artists, even today, that are getting funded, weren't born and raised in New York—and they talk about New York artists. I mean, there's less than what, 3 percent or so? Or nothing maybe?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right, yeah.

FLETCHER BENTON: I mean, it's nothing.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, that is true, and it's something that's interesting to consider. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: They go there because it's the Big Apple, right? They know that's where it starts.

PAUL KARLSTROM: They're like residents or interns.

FLETCHER BENTON: They go to the temple.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Would you talk about—looking at the positive side of regionalism, which seems to be our issue of the moment, you talked about the freedom that you're allowed—or one is allowed—in the regions. Perhaps less pressure, less temptation, less need to participate in this frenetic activity. The possibility of being yourself—and that is a positive factor. And I gather you feel that that situation here has allowed you to pursue ideas as they come to you, your own concerns, without the same kind or pressure to conform—or by that I guess we really mean to try to participate stylistically in something that is attracting attention, to get attention. So you're better off for that. But do you feel that. . . . Let me back up a bit. Under no circumstances, as far as I can see, does your work show the stamp of the region. You're not responding, as far as I can tell, to qualities that pertain to the Bay Area. I mean that is not one of the things that you've gotten from this soil, or this atmosphere, environment if you will. The freedom, yes. Do you suspect—this is speculative—that if you had stayed in New

York. . . . In other words, if you hadn't have made the decision to return, that your work would have been fundamentally different?

FLETCHER BENTON: To answer. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Have you ever speculated about that?

FLETCHER BENTON: Oh, yes, yes. I've thought so often about it. I don't think I would have, I might have stayed longer, but I don't think I would still be there. I mean, I just know my personality. I think I'm basically a shy person. I cover it up in lots of ways. Everybody likes to say they're basically shy. I think I am as well basically shy, and I know how I try to cover it up. But I know that if I am challenged too much, I will not compromise. I'm a very stubborn Welshman. It's gotten me in lots of trouble, but in the case of my work, it's been my salvation. It's been my escape. My work has been a place where I go that no one else can be a part of, and it's a very nice place. I suspect if I didn't have my work I might have some serious problems. But with my work it's. . . . You know, it's my love affair. And I have tried to say this to my students, that if you do not have a love affair—I don't mean a marriage; I mean an active love affair with your work, that will, that is so exotic and exciting that you know that that will sustain you for the rest of your life, you should never become an artist. And this goes back to some of that dishonesty I was trying to tell you about that I saw in the eyes and the faces and speech and work of these students at Columbia. There was no love affair. It was a business deal. That was my feeling. So, to answer another part of that question, what has regionalism given, which I think was the question. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: I think so.

FLETCHER BENTON: [chuckles] Regionalism has given me a boudoir—just to be a little romantic about it—it's given me the space to have my love affair bigger than it would have been anywhere else. It's allowed me to be able to make my way in life, pay my bills, and still have the exotic freedom of this thing I do. And all of sudden, as I get older, I don't need the carrot that's dangling in front of people in New York. I don't give a shit anymore. If they, you know, want to know where I am, they can look in the phone book. Because I am going to be no less and no more because of New York as an artist. They won't make me anything more than I am able to make of myself.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It seems to me this question of regionalism, which indeed fascinates many people, is a complex one, because you in a way are defined by where you have chosen to reside. And I think it's fair to say that regionalism for you is simply a matter of residence; it's not a stylistic consideration. Here's where the complexity comes in—and I'd like to pursue this and maybe we can exchange a few ideas. The confusion is this—or the complexity is this—in the case of your work, regionalism has not been a force in determining imagery. Stated simply, your work does not betray its locale, where it was created. It's, if you will, international, or maybe somewhere else, or maybe combination of both. So you're not a San Francisco or a California artist in that respect. And yet you do have ties, which we've pursued, to this earth. . . .

[Tape 1, side B]

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . interview, May 2, 1989, this is tape 1, side B. We were talking about the big issue, the complex issue, of regionalism, and specifically how it's affected you and your work. It seems to me to have been both positive—as is always the case with anything [chuckles]—both positive and negative aspects. One of the observations I was making is that regionalism is not regionalism as a style, as a kind of imagery that reflects place. And this is often how the term regionalism is used. Really what you're talking about is a matter of geographic location or residence. You happen to have residence in an area, that then is also described as regional, having certain qualities, none of which—as far as I can see—really appears in your work. It seems other. And so the impact of regionalism on you is more the result of being in that area and being removed from an area where there's a more active criticism, where things are noticed, there's more activity. It leaves you a little lonesome, quiet, and removed in some ways in terms of the activity of your career. One of the questions that arises—is what about the dealer, what about the instrument that is established to compensate for that distance from the New York center of activity. What you're looking for, of course, is an audience for your work. I mean, this is natural and normal, and I assume that this is the case with you as well. No matter what it looks like and no matter where you live. The disadvantage of being here has been—and continues to be, I guess—that you're a little out of the swim, and you're simply not seen as much as you really need to be seen. But the fact of the matter is, you have a very well-known dealer, John Berggruen. I would say John operates on a certainly national if not an international basis with some very distinguished artists. I mean, you're in what's got to be the best gallery in San Francisco to achieve what we're talking about: get you and your work out there.

FLETCHER BENTON: But that's not the function of galleries outside of New York.

PAUL KARLSTROM: No?

FLETCHER BENTON: I don't think. Not the big boys. Their function is to bring art to the community. . . . John

certainly is the number one, maybe the number one on the West coast. He's not interested in promoting artists. This is my evaluation, dear John, if you ever hear this recording. This is my opinion.

PAUL KARLSTROM: [chuckles]

FLETCHER BENTON: But he doesn't really care about developing me or Nate Oliveira, or anyone else he handles. What he is concerned about is making money. And he brings to the community the young artists in New York that are doing this and that that have already proven themselves there, that have had good shows, good sales, and so forth. And if an artist—God help him; we've all been there, and I'll certainly be there again—go into a slump or fall out of favor, well, my feeling about John Berggruen is he's not going to shore that up [or] make the difference. The same is true of any other major dealer here.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, right, and we're not going to single out John.

FLETCHER BENTON: No.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It just so happens that he is your dealer.

FLETCHER BENTON: It just so happens that our dealers today are operating as merchants. That's their, that's how they see themselves.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But isn't it in the interest of a local dealer, whether it's John Berggruen or anybody else, to find ways to make more visible their own artists, simply for business reasons.

FLETCHER BENTON: Not when they constantly bring in new, people who haven't been shown here who they can sell to their collectors that may already have Nate Oliveiras or Fletcher Bentons. It's much easier for them to do that than to spend great amounts of time developing the guys that have already sort of had their fifteen minutes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What if you had strong representation, consistently, over the years, New York city? Regardless that you happen to live in San Francisco. Your main representative now, your main dealer—I guess exclusive. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: [shakes head no]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Not exclusive, but the main one is San Francisco based. What if you had maintained a strong relationship with a New York dealer, even though your art then changed? You were known, as you say—primarily still are in some quarters—for kinetic [work]. What difference would that have made? Are you suggesting that you absolutely have to have one of the prominent New York dealers to get the kind of ongoing visibility that's necessary to keep a career, well, at least in the public eye.

FLETCHER BENTON: First of all, I can answer that question this way: I realize that there is only one thing that an art dealer can give to an artist, and that is credibility. They're not going to give you chicken noodle soup when you've got a cold. They, in most cases, are not going to finance your career—and if they do, you really are forever under their control. They will have your work out and try to sell it. So the more important dealer, the more exposure the dealer has, the more exposure the artist gets. That's all you're going to get. And especially for sculptors it's quite often you could make more money without a dealer, once you reach a certain point. So a dealer gives one credibility. Now if I had a strong dealer in New York, who had continued to have my work out in the public eye, there is a danger in that as well. And in my case, I think my growth might have been stunted because of it. Dealers I think subtly do ask for whatever they've been selling well from the artist. And that may not always be where the artist is. And the danger of having a New York representation that's strong is that they can support your work at auction—which for sculptors it doesn't make much difference—and they will have a tendency to drive the prices up. And that is a trap, because for sculpture there's a different commitment from the collector—and we can talk about that later, and I want to talk about that later—but I think that over the years my prices may have been driven up to such a point that the people able to pay those prices become fewer and fewer. And since sculpture has to occupy space, it is more difficult in many cases to sell than something that hangs on the wall. So it can be diminishing in that respect, too. Then all of a sudden you wake up someday and you realize, "Geez, I'm getting $175,000 for this piece, but selling one of those a year," or two of those a year, or whatever. And the dealer's putting pressure on me in subtle ways to do more of whatever's selling for $175,000, rather than saying, "Keep on truckin' with whatever you're interested in, Fletcher, and we'll see how it goes." Those are the negatives of it all in New York. I think there comes a time for every artist when he adds to the stable of a dealer. When that happens—not to every artist; I mean, it has to a few artists who reach a certain amount of exposure and importance—and when that happens you then have something to say, subtle or otherwise. But if you're a midlife artist and you're sort of middle in importance, you know, your muscle is less.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Fletcher, you raise something of a dilemma here, it seems to me. Because you say on the

one hand that by being removed from New York, or as we've been discussing, being located in a region not the main center, your career has in a sense been handicapped in a public way. Your dealer. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: Wait a second. My career hasn't been. I mean, I feel great about it. It's just that what has been. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Visibility.

FLETCHER BENTON: . . . hampered is, from my point of view, is having my work evaluated. I mean, it hasn't been. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, okay, the visibility then.

FLETCHER BENTON: Right, it really hasn't been evaluated. It hasn't had a chance to get in the horse race.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah. Well, okay, that's what I meant. I know that in fact you have a very successful career, basically.

FLETCHER BENTON: As far as being able to pay my rent, I'm doing just fine.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right, right. And so that's not an issue. But what seems to be an issue, though, when you talk about being, quotes, "victim" of regionalism and the regional dealer apparatus, I think you mean the frustration of not having the work as well known internationally as in the area—you would like to just get a response, a broader critical response.

FLETCHER BENTON: To have it looked at and to have people make some judgments about it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And so it's difficult to think of a remedy though, frankly, Fletcher, because we've got a situation where you feel that less exposure because of where you've chosen to live, this has affected the situation. Your dealer, by virtue of being—it's in the nature of the beast apparently, you seem to think: If it's a local, regional dealer, they want to make money—so do New York dealers—but they're not placed as well, in the same situation, and they do not end up performing that function, which is to expose the artist, to achieve exposure for the [young] artist. Okay, so that puts you in difficulties with your [other] agent. If you're in New York, as you just said, there are other pitfalls, dangers, involved, having to do with—and one may be being stunted at an early stage, being required or encouraged to produce for a market. And one then wonders—for any artist, whether it's you, anybody else—what is the happy medium? What is the answer to that situation? Because then it isn't simply not being in New York that has this effect. You see what I'm driving at?

FLETCHER BENTON: Well, I think the answer to that is the one that is so hard for artists to grasp, because it's so simple. I mean, it took me a while to really come to grips with this, and I've tried so hard to explain this to my students. That you're working for yourself. You're working for the addiction of your own pleasure. And if that's something other people feel pleasure with you, can go along with that pleasure thing, then they buy what you're doing. And it seems to me that an artist is truly walking down an unpaved road, with lots of water puddles and stuff, and it's so easy to slip and fall. But if you . . . I hate to use the word—if you believe in yourself—I don't know any artist that doesn't have a whole hell of a lot of insecurity and doubts about what they're doing, but that's the exciting part about it, you know, that's the High Noon [factor], you know, that's great. That's what keeps us going. But it's very hard to explain to a critic, an art dealer, or a collector the absolute seductive joy, the heroin high that you get when you really have a love affair with your work. Because you're constantly working for that hit. And it's so self-serving. So I don't know, maybe I got off the track here and didn't answer your question.

PAUL KARLSTROM: No, not really.

FLETCHER BENTON: But I think there are a lot of artists that miss, that have not dealt with that. You look at Wayne Thiebaud. Doesn't matter if he has a New York dealer, whether he's collected or he's not collected, he has received such joy in painting. Anybody that's got half an eye at all can look at a Wayne Thiebaud and know this guy had a hell of a great time doing that picture. Or on the other hand, if you look at Gorky or you look, ohhh, certainly not de Kooning's later work, but even his figurative things. You can see there was a struggle there, there was a battle there, there was a, it was a one-on-one thing between the canvas and . . . Diebenkorn. As it is with Thiebaud and the canvas, but it's a different thing. There was a fight, there was a slug-it-out, there was combat. Painters have and sculptors have certain of those, their works you can look at, and you can see, "This guy's got a constant combat with this canvas." Others you can look at and you can see a constant joy. Others you can see a constant sort of meditation, where it goes almost beyond, it almost becomes a mindless act. I'm thinking of the photo-realists. I mean, they've got to get to the point where they took this picture, they're translating it to the canvas, and it's got to be some sort of higher order in their brain, where they sit there hour after hours rendering something. So that's perfectly valid. And I think you don't have a love-affair

with that and if you aren't looking for those heroin highs, it don't make any difference—dealer or not a dealer, collector or not a collector—then you don't have that love affair I was talking about. Which bridges all of the puddles in the road, gets you through that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right. Well, let's assume a certain level of economic security for an artist. Thinking of the fate of artists in general, not just your case. Let's assume that there has been achieved an economic security, presumably that the work is selling well enough to provide that—or maybe there's another combination of things, maybe rich inlaws or something. Who knows. But there's not that concern about just surviving. And that there's enough for a studio, for space in which to work, materials. And that then provides this arena for what you're talking about, whether it's a struggle with the work, the confronting the canvas or the materials, or whether it's just a joy in working—and this presumably is why artists choose to be artists. The best ones. You know, this is what they're about, what they want to do. And I think that that's valid, and I would like to think that's true, that's the view I have. But it's still for most artists—and I suspect you're one of them—that that rather introspective, rather private activity, working for oneself, whether it's the joy of it, the need, the struggle—whatever—is given and fine up to a point. But it seems to me that many artists crave this relationship with the world.

FLETCHER BENTON: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: With the world. And it, so it isn't enough, I mean, what you describe is why it's done and what creates these things, these images, these pieces. But the concerns that you've expressed, and the whole terminology—victim—of being regional. . . . You certainly haven't been victimized economically; you have a solid. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: Victim, again, is a tough word. I don't feel, I don't feel I've been unduly victimized. I chose to be here, and by being here I realize that I'm going to have less judgments made of my work.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So the goals, what we're really talking about—this is what I was trying to lead to—is that the circle is incomplete, the scenario for the artist—certainly some artists, presumably you are among them—is incomplete without this serious attention, this relationship with an audience and preferably and informed, a critical audience, where judgments can be made, where there's a response—and an articulated response. So it comes into the area of criticism, and thoughtful writing. What I'm suggesting—I don't want to put words in your mouth—but what I'm suggesting is that part of what you are interested in, as an artist, is being a participant in a dialogue about art issues. And that your work then perhaps can add another perspective, an example of the bigger issues, and finally cultural issues, a dialogue in our civilization, our society. And if you're not known, if you're not visible, you can't participate, no matter how much joy you have in making your work. Is that fair? Do you. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: That's quite fair. My concerns, at my age, were not the concerns I had ten years ago, certainly fifteen years ago. I mean I always had my love affairs, that was from such a young age. I hope to God I can get it up and keep it that way with my art until I pass on. But I have, my commitment has not been superficial to my love affair. Everything that I've done has been for the benefit of that, for the benefit of my work, for the benefit of the freedom of choice. By the way, the freedom of choice—I just have to stop for a moment. Because you, in your questioning, it crossed my mind that I think artists become artists—those who stick it out—because they want to be totally, I mean, one hundred percent responsible for their actions. I mean, if you were a painter or a sculptor, you are totally responsible from beginning to end for every single decision. No person, no set of circumstances, no political thing—at least in this country—can, if you're tough, can have any effect on your decisions in the conception, from conception to completion of a work of art. Those are all gloriously your own decisions—good or bad—and at the end you stand there, cross your arms, stick your finger up your nose, or whatever you do, and you say, "Well, that bunch of decisions taught me something, you know, it gives me a place to go next, go on to the next thing," or "Those decisions I feel are totally wrong, and therefore I won't make them again." But in every case, the learning process is total. I mean, it's a. . . . Do you know what I'm saying as an artist? I mean, maybe you understand this as a historian and a writer, and maybe you don't. But artists have, that's the gift. You know, they say, "Oh, this person's very talented," or "Oh, this person's very gifted." Bullshit! You know. What is really important is the artist is totally, totally, responsible for what he does. And where else in life is that true? I mean, even the writers don't have that privilege. The poets do but the writers don't. Because they're edited, they're knocked around, they're, you know. . . . But an artist, a fine artist, is totally responsible for it. I find that incredible. I mean, to have that opportunity in my one life to do something that I start from beginning to end, it's finished, and I stand back, and it's all my stuff. To me, that's just beyond words.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay, acknowledging that, which is I think a rather eloquent statement of why you do what you do. I don't think you can improve on that very much. Nonetheless, I would think you agree—and certainly our conversation so far indicates this would be the case—that there comes a point when you want to move beyond your own experience of making the art, of the activity, of the freedom, everything else that's part of this,

and you want to communicate something, you want to connect with an audience. I gather that there has been in part of this total scenario a dialogue with the world. And if it isn't jumping into the big question too soon, I would like to know how you see this dialogue, the nature of this dialogue—you know, what kind of a relationship. You talked about a love affair with your work, and that is a relationship. What about your relationships, through your work, with the audience?

FLETCHER BENTON: Well, that's a good question, and I'll try to answer it—and maybe this is where I would hope someday to, you know, have some perspective, have my work put in some overall perspective by someone. I don't think I am special. You know, it just so happens that I'm interested in doing what I do. I don't think that makes me of a higher order than someone who doesn't do it. And what gives me thrills, what gives me pleasure, I'm selfish enough to think it must give other people pleasure. I mean I truly believe that if I could find that kick, that thing I was talking about, that gives me great pleasure in this love affair, I hope to hell it's got, it's [universal] enough that others can respond to it in some way. And I really believe this firmly. I made a decision to work with geometry. I don't want this tape to sound like I sat down and made a decision. I didn't sit down and make a decision. The decision was made some magical way. I don't know who makes them for me, but they're made magically. That I was going to deal only with geometry. And so far in these pieces of sculpture, since the kinetic period, even that period, I've been dealing with geometry. I may fall out of love with that, but right now it's my main concern. To me geometry represents the musical notes that. . . . Well, let's take a piano for instance. You've got 88 keys, you hit 'em and they do certain things. You combine these, they make different things. My bone pile—or my palette—is made up of geometry, of shapes that are fairly common to most all of us, as musical notes are common to most all of us. And I might digress for a moment and say that [what I respond to in the art] [is what I'm after] in my own work, in that there has been a common note struck, either through a stroke, through a sense of chiaroscuro, a sense of color, that is not intellectual—and I will go back to this intellectual thing more and more, because I firmly believe that there is very little about the art process that I know of that is intellectual. But to get back to the palette of geometry: I feel that my job is to take the keys of my piano and put them together in chords, with notes, with timing, with repetition, with crescendo, with beat, with all of the things that go into music. I believe that those same things can be visual. I know very little about music. I'm somewhat tone-deaf. Yet I respond to music in a way that I [think] is most common. And that is, if something is playing along, I may not know the song or the piece of music, and if a sour note is struck, I'm almost sure I can pick up on it. I'm aware of it, because it's out of harmony with what's going on. And in my work I try to arrange these geometrical forms and shapes in such a way that you can look at them and respond to them as you would respond to music. You know, you're going to say, "Well, Jesus. That looks good," or, "That hears good," or, "That feels good." There's nothing more than trying to reach the highest order of getting these things together in a way that you as the viewer can respond to. And I don't expect you to say, "Gee, the tragedy in that stack of cubes is more than I can handle. I'm about to fall apart."

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right. [chuckles]

FLETCHER BENTON: Or, "The symphony of the triangle and the circle. . . " You know, I don't expect that.

[Tape 2, side A]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Fletcher, you were saying?

FLETCHER BENTON: If you were to say, "I like that piece, Fletcher," and I were to say, "Well, what do you like about it?" First of all, I wouldn't do that probably because it'd be very foolish of me. Because you really don't know what you like about it. You might say, "I like the six cubes that are standing up there; they look like stairs, and that funny little thing sitting on there, leaning up against a shaft, and [shepherd's] this and a [what]." But if I were to push you, you probably couldn't really isolate anything. As would be true about a great work of music. I mean, if you get pushed too far, you can't really discuss it; you can't tear it apart into elements. Because what makes it what it is, is the total. And it's really the job of the critics to say something about it, but if you were to say, "God, I don't know what I like about it, it just makes me feel good," you have said to me what I have tried [chuckles] to give you. Because there are certain things that. . . . I mean, I could do something very ugly too, and I could do it as an ugly thing, and if you were to say, "That's very ugly," I would say, "My god, that's terrific. I've gotten to you. You say that's very ugly; what I meant it to be was very ugly." So it's not like, for instance, analyzing Rodin's sculpture—or maybe that's a poor example—or the painters. I mean, it's much easier for historians and critics to talk about painting. Because it's, first of all, it's two-dimensional, but secondly it's all illusion to start with. It's not something you can bump into or ignore. You can't do that with sculpture. Sculpture is real, in space. If you walk through a room where there is a sculpture in daylight, and you come back through that same room at night with the lights out, you're damn aware of that sculpture being in there. And it has a presence that goes beyond just the illusion that painting's all about. So it's not quite the same, but it's a critic's job to break down what the artist is trying to do. It's not the artist's job, ever.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So what is missing then, to a degree, is the critical participation in your career, that has been sort of a missing link. Because you, as you say here, it's the critic's job to try to identify these qualities, or try to

verbalize, articulate, the reasons for these responses. You know what you want from your audience, or certainly part of it. You're looking for a response, and you have ways of working with materials and with forms and shapes that you hope will strike those common notes.

FLETCHER BENTON: Exactly.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And yet. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: And either it's going to or it's not going to.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

FLETCHER BENTON: You can't hype it up.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But to complete that important relationship, then somebody else needs to reflect on the dynamic of what's happening and try to explain it.

FLETCHER BENTON: Where I feel that regionalism has shorted some of us, a little bit—and I'm not crying in my beer. I mean. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: All right. It's your tape [interview]. You can if you want to.

FLETCHER BENTON: Yeah. [chuckles] It's your, we're friends, and I'm more able to be totally free about things with you maybe than someone else. In the sixties, there was this great invitational surge among museums, and, you know, there was enough [art] floating around, they could have invitationals. They weren't even juried shows. I mean, as I recall, you were invited to show. At the Carnegie or at the Whitney, during that time, it was a little more open to what was going on, and they weren't always looking for the newest stuff. They were throwing a few of the old boys in there just to keep everybody honest—the Whitney, I'm talking about.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Um hmm.

FLETCHER BENTON: And there were many other, throughout the world, other invitational shows, which were done to have the work out there, to have the people confronted with it, to have them talk about it. I think shows today are more a shock value, more a trendy value. A lot of the museums have a franchise mentality now. [raises voice as if speaking in a lecture hall—Trans.] I will say that again: A franchise mentality.

PAUL KARLSTROM: [laughs]

FLETCHER BENTON: And, you know, whatever is passing through New York gets on the train and goes out to the far regions of the uncivilized West. I think it's bullshit. That's all right, I mean. . . . But, we don't have the opportunity—we—the artists on the one hand to be placed in a public view where we are there with many other artists and can be compared visually, discussed, torn apart, beaten up, whatever the case is. Those shows don't seem to exist much anymore. I don't know, unless you know something I don't know, that there are many really invited group shows throughout the museum [structure], throughout the regions, throughout the vast city of New York, where the public has a chance to take the younger fellow's art and say, "Well, how does this stack up to Diebenkorn?" or to whoever, David Smith, or whoever else. And I think that's one of the biggest crimes of the late seventies and eighties. I hope to God it doesn't go into the nineties, but I suspect it will. There are too many young curators and young museum directors out there that put more emphasis on their ability to be current on what is going on in the hottest corners of New York than on a total overview of what [really] has been going on. And I think it's tragic. It again goes back to their function as a curator or museum director to serve the public—to promote and serve the artists and present them to the public. The dealers have become merchants, the museum curators and directors [are becoming a] bunch of trendy yuppies. But history weeds all that stuff out. [chuckling] I sound like I'm beating the drum because of some hurt that I have. I don't have any hurt. I just think it's a shame. I go to a museum, I can't see what the hell's going on in comparison to what has gone on anymore.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you feel that the. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: I mean, we get [Anselm] Kiefer over here. We get Kiefer here at the San Francisco museum, well, geez, that's great. I would much rather have the money that was spent on the Kiefer show, in doing a survey show of, say, from 1960 to 1980, Bay Area [conservative] show. Or something that is really, puts things in perspective and allows those artists in those areas to be looked at.
[Interruption in taping]

PAUL KARLSTROM: We're now picking up after a little break in the taping for lunch. When we stopped taping you were talking about something that you regretted, over the last two decades at least, and that's the absence of the kind of exhibition, probably juried, but large-group shows where you have an opportunity to see a number of artists brought together and a chance really, I suppose, to get a better indication of what's happening in current

art. Probably a better idea for the critics and for the audience, but also I guess for the artists themselves, to see how they're fitting in. And I gather from what you said that you felt that this, that the current situation, which takes place pretty much in the museum arena, traveling exhibitions, which are curated, as they say—the curators make the decisions, make the choices—that this presents a distorted view of contemporary art. Is this right?

FLETCHER BENTON: I think so.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Who do you feel is responsible for that? What does that mean about art of our times, and the way it's being handled?

FLETCHER BENTON: I don't know who's responsible for it. I think that San Francisco is a typical situation, you know. We have a new museum director, Mr. Jack Lane [San Francisco Museum of Modern Art— Ed.], who came here to make a name and push his career further, and also get a new museum for San Francisco. He was brought here by very powerful people on the board. And I think that he's going to try to fill in all the inadequacies of the museum based on their formula for a franchised museum, sort of like a Jack-in-the-Box, and the menu is fixed, the collection is fixed, and I don't see it serving the community the way the museum has in the past. And even in the past the museum has slowly been divorcing itself from the community, from my point of view. I'm sure that people will argue the other way. But instead of San Francisco being a museum that is unique in itself, which brings in shows that are available, but also concentrates very heavily on formulating shows here, of people who've made a substantial reputation for themselves on the West coast. And sending these shows out. Those little and beautiful shows—not little, but beautiful shows that go out to other museums to show them what we contribute as West coast artists. They're many, many artists here deserve that sort of thing. They intend to, from what I gather, focus more on the international aspect of a well-rounded franchise-type museum. I think this is very egotistical and. . . . The San Francisco museum can never compete with L.A. County, and for them to think that a new museum, downtown, and so forth, is going to compete with the Los Angeles art scene and LACMA [Los Angeles County Museum of Art—Ed.], MOCA [Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art—Ed.], it's just not gonna happen. There's not enough money here to do it. There's not enough openness. So we're going to end up with just a nice, mediocre museum that reflects really nothing that you can't find anywhere else in the United States. So I don't know in these traveling shows, these curated shows, who is responsible for them. I don't know how it works anymore. But I suspect the amount of shows that are floating around. . . . And most of that get to town here, were curated elsewhere. If you've only got four or five shows you see a year, curated by four or five people, you're getting very narrow view of what the hell's going on. You've got the view of four or five people.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Do you feel then that in the museum community, whether it's the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art or University Art Museum at Berkeley, Oakland. . . . Well, keep Oakland out of it a bit, because it has a pretty good record of focusing on local or on California; that's its mandate. But some of the other local institutitions, do you feel that there is insufficient commitment to the community on the part of those who make the decisions, that in other words it's really a professional tracking, and it just happens that their next post is at, like Jack Lane, at the Modern, to further his reputation, or perhaps move on elsewhere, but basically his role here is to, well, enhance the credentials and reputation of Jack Lane?

FLETCHER BENTON: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And so the choices then are made entirely on that basis, or largely on that basis, rather than perhaps a sensitivity or openness to the local art community.

FLETCHER BENTON: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: [chuckles] I'm giving your answers. Well, I was just checking.

FLETCHER BENTON: No.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I wanted to make sure I've got. . . . I don't think we need to dwell on this right now, although it's part of the whole regional picture that we've been discussing, but what about some of the other museums here in the area—over the past years, and right now? I mean, there's some changes, important changes, afoot. That [is the case at] the Fine Arts Museums. And the fact you participated in the program, "The Eye of the Artist," at the California Palace of the Legion of Honor, which [the series—Ed.] is devoted entirely to local artists and their work and their views, sponsored by the "Old Master" museum in this case, not the modern museum. Does that hold any special promise to you? I mean, candidly, what do you think that means? What's happening?

FLETCHER BENTON: Well, as far as I'm concerned, it holds the only promise. And I'm not going to mention names because it's not even important.

PAUL KARLSTROM: _____. No.

FLETCHER BENTON: But many of the people who were dedicated to the San Francisco Museum that were here three directors ago, and who have contributed immensely in time and money to the development of California art for the San Francisco museum, and through the San Francisco Art Institute when it was connected with the museum, used to have the San Francisco Art Annual, I think it was called, big survey show. In due respect to all these people—not all of them; a large percentage of 'em—have pulled out of the San Francisco museum and are saying, "Look, you guys at the Legion and DeYoung are trying to do something. Count on us." And I'm one of them.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Um hmm.

FLETCHER BENTON: I mean whatever I can do I'll do it. I don't intend to service the San Francisco museum as I have over the past any longer. It's going to be a nice little boutique museum, and if that's what they want, fine.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That really is an interesting shift here, and one that seems to be as a result, to a certain extent, of the personalities or interests of the directors. I mean, one has to think that that has played a major role, that it isn't the mandate of the trustees in either case—entirely—because I don't think. . . . Well, let's put it this way. This is not an interview with me, but Harry Parker at the Fine Arts Museums—and it's very true—his arrival here will mark a shift in the involvement of those established city institutions, vis-a-vis contemporary, or certainly recent art, and California art. Because Mr. Parker is interested in the twentieth century. It's as simple as that. So he will be interested in focusing more on that. The changes at the DeYoung, especially in that respect, [involve] two things: much more concentration on American, and then also bringing the American [collection] really up into the twentieth century, with some interest in more recent art. I think [it] reflects entirely his idea, not the trustees. The trustees back him. What happened at the Modern, which is perhaps more germane to our topic? What do you see in looking over the years in the patterns of activity at the San Francisco Modern? What happened there?

FLETCHER BENTON: Well, I'm not really sure, because I've tried not to be too involved in the museum. I do know there were key people there, as they say on the college campus, "There were core people there," that cared about the San Francisco art scene: Mary Keesling, Byron Meyer, Frank Hamilton, and there are many, many others. But from what I can see, the board of trustees has shifted to corporate minds working there that seem to think the [thrust] of our museum should be more national and international than local, so the concentration of money and effort is not used to serve the community through buying and exhibiting works from the community, but works from other places. The [implication] is: Let's make it a strong international museum, the best we can. And I [also] get this feeling they're competing with L.A.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Um hmm.

FLETCHER BENTON: And that's too bad, because they're going to lose.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But do you think that's entirely illegitimate? Could one argue, on the other side, that a vital world class, as you will, art center—or a city that aspires to be that—needs. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: I don't think they've got the money to do that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay. So you think then it's a matter. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: And I think they've got a champagne appetite and a beer budget. And I don't think they can do it. They're starting too late.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Then it's really a matter of the use of resources, with their inability to recognize the limits of resources that are available.

FLETCHER BENTON: My feeling is that if they wanted to be an outstanding museum, they have an opportunity to do that by dealing with the strong California people that are already here that they could present to the world. From Richard Diebenkorn on. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

FLETCHER BENTON: . . . to Wayne Thiebaud, to you name it. [Robert] Arneson. Let's see, Los Angeles people, many, many wonderful artists there. And then they would be a special museum. That could be a special thing. Doesn't mean they have to close off the city limits to the rest of the world. We could still have good, strong curated shows coming in here. But that the main concentration and contribution would be unique. Yet it seems to me they don't want to be unique; they want to be franchised, as I've said. And I don't understand that at all. I just can't see them competing with some of the great museums around. And I don't care who comes in to direct it. I just don't see how they can play catch-up ball. I mean, you're in the museum business; maybe you could, you could say, "I don't agree with that, Fletcher."

PAUL KARLSTROM: No, no, I wouldn't say that. I mean, I wouldn't say that I disagree. I would say this, though. The role of the Oakland Museum, of course, has been very close to what you're suggesting. It truly is in Oakland; it's not in San Francisco. And there's limits to what they can do. But certainly they have attempted to carve out that area for themselves.

FLETCHER BENTON: Well, but they didn't have the money, they never had the great directorship, and it was a city museum.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Um hmm.

FLETCHER BENTON: That's totally different. San Franciso is a private museum. I think there is money available there to them now, but not if they're going out on the open market to bid against paintings that are anywhere from, you know, $300,000 to a couple of million. I don't know how they can do it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, that's a problem of course a lot of museums face now. What about the cultivation of patrons here in the Bay Area by, well, by the San Francisco Museum, but then the response of—or lack of response by—patrons in the modern field in general. I mean, how would you characterize that?

FLETCHER BENTON: I can't compare it to anything.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay.

FLETCHER BENTON: And I don't really think I—excuse me—[should] talk about that. I do feel that there's less of an opportunity in San Franciso than there is in Los Angeles for doing things, because San Francisco traditionally is a very conservative town. Those people who have a lot of money don't particularly want to hang it out in front. They don't make a big deal about it. It's, you know, it's respected to just sort of be quiet about your work. Well. And in Los Angeles, as you know, it's kind of in reverse. You've got it, it's hanging out there, everybody to see it. . . . I don't see the money flowing easily in San Francisco.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, you've been—aside from the museums—I mean, you have been here long enough to observe—and in a position—to observe the nature of local patronage. And I am not thinking of museums; I'm thinking of collectors, those who were willing to invest in, show an interest in collecting contemporary art. How would you characterize it, and do you see any changes over the last. . . . Obviously there are people who collect your work. You have collectors and all that. What about the Bay Area over the last few decades in that respect?

FLETCHER BENTON: Well, I think it's, there's more collecting here. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Than when you arrived?

FLETCHER BENTON: Yes. There's more collecting everyplace than there was thirty years ago, but, you know, quite frankly, I am not one of the people in the know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, you know, we can talk about our impressions, and over the years certainly you would have developed impressions of, well, you know, just how good it is here. Is this a city that supports visual arts? Whether it be a museum or. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: In comparison to where?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, in comparison to the ideal, I won't say that, because that would be good positive support of all the cultural institutions. In comparison to, I don't know, a comparable regional center—maybe Los Angeles. You've talked about that. Can't compare it to New York. I mean, we're not going to ask that.

FLETCHER BENTON: I think there are a group of very serious collectors here. I think that there is some prejudice to what they collect, as a group. And that's a general opinion that I have that may not be a fact.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What is that prejudice?

FLETCHER BENTON: Well, I think it's very supportive of the Art Institute—what represents the Art Institute. I think it's very much the California funk thinking and school, California figurative and landscape school. I think that they support that very much. A lot of people own my work here. So it's not sour grapes for me. But generally speaking I don't think the collectors here take any chances, except maybe through this Northern California Art Institute way of painting and thinking and. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you're describing a situation where, interestingly enough, the regional qualities, the imagery, the style that's associated with the region, is that which is collected locally and supported. You say that this is your impression, but among those who have collected art, if it's locals, they'll look for the, well, the Bay Area, the typical Bay Area expressions, the regional expressions.

FLETCHER BENTON: The Bay Area school. If you were to say. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: In the largest sense.

FLETCHER BENTON: In the largest sense, the Bay Area school is what's collected.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Of which you are not a part.

FLETCHER BENTON: I am not a part of it. But that sounds like I'm playing my fiddle here when. . . . No, no, it's okay. If I had to count on San Francisco for what has happened to me, I'd be in big trouble.

[Tape 2, side B]
[This entire tape side was recorded at a lower level than usual, so tape hiss masks much of the conversation. I especially had trouble understanding when both PK and FB talked at once.—Trans.]

PAUL KARLSTROM: We've been talking about regionalism, Fletcher, a subject which I think we haven't exhausted but we can certainly move on to other aspects of it now. What I would like to do now is get some of your recollections of what it was like here when you arrived. In other words, what was the situation in which you found yourself? And I mean, of course, in terms of the art world. You were not in the beginning, I think, directly or intimately involved. Or maybe that's a wrong impression, that, you know, it took a few years to begin to develop your own role within the community. What was it like here? What did you find?

FLETCHER BENTON: Well, I came here in 1956 and gravitated to North Beach. I heard about Nate Oliveira at the Institute; I knew that Diebenkorn was there, Joan Brown was a student at that time, over there doing some great paintings, Manuel Neri was around. There was a group of artists about my age that were over there, but strangely enough I never became a part of that group of people. I don't know why that was. I guess it's because I wasn't going to school at the Art Institute, and I didn't see them socially. They'd come to North Beach occasionally, but there was no interaction. They hung out in other bars. I hung out in the main bars up Grant Avenue: The Place, the Coffee Gallery, the Bagel Shop, Vesuvio's. And most of the Art Institute students, at least if my memory is right, were hanging out in a couple bars down close to Bay Street, right down from the Art Institute. So our paths didn't really cross. And I didn't go to a lot of openings. I was not in the art scene.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But you thought of yourself as an artist.

FLETCHER BENTON: Yeah. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: I mean you moved here with a self—conception as artist. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: That's right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . to set up your career.

FLETCHER BENTON: And I painted signs in North Beach to make a living, and I showed my paintings in the Coffee Gallery and The Place, the bars out there.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, you did?

FLETCHER BENTON: Yeah. I had my first one—man show with The Place where all the poets had blabbermouth night on Monday night. I had my first one—man show there. My second one—man show was at the Coffee Gallery the year it opened. I had the first show in there. And I was doing my best to paint every day, and I sold encyclopedias at night and painted signs for a living. Encyclopedias were. . . . Oh, that was black time, oh boy. But I did pick up sign jobs, and I was able to squeak by. Had no extra money, but I did have extra time. I had time. And I realized then that that's all I would ever have is time. And not that that's any great revelation, but I realized that, you know, whatever I did with my day, the more time I could save to do my art—or at least think about it or play around with it—-the better off I was going to be, so I didn't really have a straight job. I worked as a janitor: Maxine Keetering's coffee shop, right above Manuel Neri's studio on Grant, the corner of Grant and Green. It's still there. But I was not in what you would call the main hot stream of young artists, which was strictly Art Institute.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, did you know about them? I mean. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: I knew about them but I didn't know them.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Um hmm.

FLETCHER BENTON: And it's interesting, now as I look back, I've never been. . . . I wasn't a part of it then, which is probably in a way very helpful. . . . I don't know what would have happened to me if I had assimilated over

there. It's very interesting. But I steered clear of that, and I remember seeing one of the art annuals, Art Institute annuals at the San Francisco museum, and I saw these paintings by Joan Brown that just knocked me right out of my socks. And I was at that time 25, 26. Joan must have been 22, 23, maybe. And they were so dynamic. There were [also] some Diebenkorns in that show, and some Bryan Wilsons—-and they were so dynamic that that left me perplexed.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What do you mean?

FLETCHER BENTON: Well, it gave my work another perspective. It made me feel very insecure; it made me not want to deal with the Art Institute in any way, because in a way it became threatening.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You were intimidated?

FLETCHER BENTON: Intimidated. I was very intimidated, yes. So I continued to work even more so within my own self, my own shell. That kept me from having the opportunity of being closer to that whole scene. So here I am 35 years later, 34 years later, just. . . . I know all these people now, but I'm still just as isolated now as I was then. [chuckling] Also you asked me in general what was the art scene here. The art scene was very, very good. I can't think of her name now, the woman who was the director of San Fransico Museum who went on to a directorship in New Delhi, India. She was. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Morley, Grace McCann Morley.

FLETCHER BENTON: Grace Morley.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

FLETCHER BENTON: I knew her not well, but I knew her. But what was going on then was foundation stuff. It was good stuff. It was straight—up ball stuff. I mean it was people like [Mary] Keesling, and all these people that were here in the community that, because of what's happening now, have now drifted away from San Francisco Museum, were building the museum at that time. There was some charter thing where the museum and the Art Institute were under the same charter. I only know that when I was teaching at the Art Institute I was on the last committee that dealt with the Art Institute annual at the San Francisco museum, and that was the first year [Gerald] Nordland came there. I remember Jerry telling me their budget was, at the San Francisco Museum, was $75,000 a year including the elevator operators. That was the last year we had the art annual. And I remember feeling this sickness in a way. I was on the art annual's committee at the Art Institute, as I just said, and we realized that it was time not to have it any more because certain political things were happening. John Coplans had come here and pulled a deal where he juried the show one year and selected, I don't know what it was, five or ten or fifteen artists to show the following year as invited artists. And all of a sudden, there was a kind of a corruptness, a kind of a controlled competition, that a lot of the artists felt very badly about. John Coplans was not a contributor to the San Francisco art scene. In my estimation he was a user, and the only thing he really did that was positive was he was involved with the Artforum magazine, along with Jerry Nordland and some of the others. But. . . . So it was, that was the last Art Institute annual. And that annual was probably the most important show on the West coast, for—we never used the word then, but "emerging." I mean, there were no emerging artists then. We were young artists. But it was a show where the young artists could be selected, juried in with some of the older guys, and it was wonderful. Because you could, as I grumped about on our earlier tape, you could see what was going on. You had some overview of things. And I don't know, I guess [it was] after Grace Morley things. . . . John. . . . Oh my goodness. John. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Humphrey?

FLETCHER BENTON: . . . Humphrey was there trying to hold the thing together, and when Jerry came [Gerald Nordland], Jerry was able to remodel the museum, which I thought under the circumstances was a monumental task.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Because of funding?

FLETCHER BENTON: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: _____ the money for it.

FLETCHER BENTON: Yeah, funding, money, opposition, the whole thing. It was probably a greater coup than them getting a new museum now, what Jerry Nordland did. So he stayed for a while and then Henry [Hopkins] came, and Henry left, and now we have the great corporate image running our museum, and we're off on the generic—museum track. And. . . . So to get back to your question, it was a hot time then. There was support for young people. There was energy and vitality. And, you know, I think even what vitality and energy we have now comes out of the Collector's Forum and a few groups around the museum that really are these same people who

were doing it then, you know: Byron Meyer and. . . . That, again, that core group of people. God knows what's going to happen when they go their way, or if they all abandon the San Francisco Museum, and I know some of them that have already done it. 'Cause these people are old war horses, and they're wise, and they've seen it from the seedling to, to maybe it getting all cut down into timbers now. So it was a different time. The art dealers were dealing in art through a dedication and an interest in the artist. And there was a camaraderie amongst everybody that I don't think exists so much now. The artists don't even congregate so much. The art biz is biz, biz only.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So even though you say that you, at least in the beginning, didn't have a lot of contact with art students, I mean, the Art Institute group, in fact, or nonetheless, over time, after a few year anyway, you did feel part of a Bay Area art community, regardless of the direction your work was taking.

FLETCHER BENTON: It's not true.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: [I, I've] never felt a part of the Bay Area artists.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, okay, then let's clarify the. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: Because my connection with artists was more social than. . . . And saying hello and recognizing each other. But to be, to move with Roy DeForest and Joan Brown and Manuel Neri and all those guys down the pike together with Bob [Robert] Hudson, Bill [William] Wiley, and the rest of them, I was not going on that road. I was never included in that sort of California thing.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, but. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: Or Bay Area thing.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But you did describe a situation which you found more positive than the situation now, and you mentioned, you used the term camaraderie, and that there were a group of collectors, there was Grace McCann Morley, there were the annuals, and so whether or not you were personally. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: But that was not a concentrated group or. . . . It wasn't what they call the Bay Area art scene. When you say "the Bay Area art scene," it's like saying "the New York school." You know, it really narrows itself down to kind of a given. What I was talking about was not a given, but the lack of a given. By the cameraderie meaning that the museum would work with the Art Institute, there would be juried shows where everybody could submit, and they would be juried and put in the San Francisco Museum as a juried show. And my memory is that those shows were fairly wide open, until Coplans came along and felt the need to tighten everything up, and then it just choked itself to death.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So the operative. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: They were introduction shows. It gave each young guy a chance to put his [or her] stuff up there—you know, if he was lucky. If he didn't get it this year, he might get in the next year. But there was always that hope that it would get out there and get juried and everybody would get to see it. Not true anymore. Not at the museum level. There's no such thing—that I know about. And there never was in Oakland.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So what you're describing then is, when you talk about a positive situation here, at the time you arrived or shortly thereafter, it was really an openness. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . an availability of opportunities to show, whether or not you were part of the group you're describing as the Bay Area school.

FLETCHER BENTON: The museum was serving the community.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay.

FLETCHER BENTON: It is not serving the community in that way now, nor will it ever again. It's gone.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, how did you come to. . . . Maybe I'm making an assumption here, but you talk about some of these patrons and then collectors, those who are interested, supportive of Bay Area art—or art that was being produced here, and artists, emerging artists. . . . Presumably some of the people you've mentioned made connection with you at some point, whether it was Byron Meyer or, you know, anybody else like that. Did this come about. . . . At some point you were discovered or acknowledged, seen, as somebody working in this area.

FLETCHER BENTON: Well, I. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Do you recall?

FLETCHER BENTON: Not exactly. What happened was, there were a few artists, there was Diebenkorn, Bryan Wilson, myself, and some Sacramento artists that were showing at Gump's, at that time—and that was pretty much the premier gallery. . . . Then Dilexi [Gallery] came along, and Dilexi picked up the harder core, sort of what we know as the California group now, Roy DeForest. . . . Oh, gosh, it fails me right now, but the really avant garde. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, Ron Nagle, or [someone] like that.

FLETCHER BENTON: Ron Nagle, right. Those guys were showing at Dilexi. I did Dilexi's gold leaf work on that first gallery.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You did?

FLETCHER BENTON: Designed their logo and painted on _____. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: So that was your _____ _____ [history].

FLETCHER BENTON: That was my closest connection. But out of the support groups in town, there was a hard—core group, the Mary Keesling/Byron Meyer group became a very hard—core group. And Rene DiRosa, and later on came into that as a hard—core supporter of California funk and northern California art. They never collected my work. To my knowledge they were never particularly interested in it. I didn't fit into that, you know, to their collecting scheme, which is fine. But there other people in town that did collect my work. Names that have since passed by. The Haases have been very supportive.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Um hmm. Which ones?

FLETCHER BENTON: Evie, and her brother, and the children.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Um hmm, okay.

FLETCHER BENTON: Of course the Haases, without the Haases there would have been no museum to go generic. And I'm sure that. . . . Oh, no, and I'm not sure, but this [new developments at SFMMA] must be very enlightening to them.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Is it possible for you to explain—or did you think about it at the time—why you and your work would attract the interest of certain individuals rather than others? It's something you've thought about. Certainly you were looking for an audience, you were looking for collectors, I would guess, you were showing in a gallery.

FLETCHER BENTON: Well, I was a decent painter. And I think if I had stayed with it, I might have found my way as a painter of some note. But some events happened. Nineteen—fifty—nine I went to Europe after a semester of teaching at Arts and Crafts [College of Arts and Crafts, Oakland]. I stayed at the Cite ' University briefly in Paris, and then I took a studio outside of Paris, traveled all over Norway, Belgium, Holland, Germany, on a motorcycle, did all that stuff. Came back to New York, and I won't go into those details now, because you may want to know about them later.

PAUL KARLSTROM: We'll go into it later, yeah.

FLETCHER BENTON: Then I came back to San Francisco, had a show at Gump's. First kinetic pieces. Show was taken down because it was considered to be obnoxious, obscene, whatever.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, we'll talk about that in detail.

FLETCHER BENTON: And I stopped painting, I stopped everything. A year or so later I started doing the kinetic work, and all of a sudden I wasn't in San Francisco anymore.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

FLETCHER BENTON: I was lifted instantly out of here to an international status. And so I never had a large number of collectors here to start with. I had this big kinetic thing. A few [collectors] bought the work here, but not many.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Um hmm.

FLETCHER BENTON: Certainly not Mary Keesling and Byron Meyer and those people. So then I came back to San Francisco, had another catharsis, stopped the kinetic thing and started doing my stuff that I'm doing now. I was doing just the opposite aesthetically of what the California Bay Area school was doing. Theirs was drip, splash, and bump, and I was doing shiny, bronze, highly resolved, machine—looking things. So I alienated—I was more and more [alienated] from the local group than ever before. And actually it's probably only been [in] the last two or three years that my work has become a little more salty, you know, a little saltier looking. No matter what I did, I could never sync with what was going on here. I was always out of sync. And that's okay, because I'm glad that I was not so influenced that I felt a need to fall in line with the movement that was going on here. And I didn't deliberately reject it. I always carried on with what I was doing and I didn't want to contaminate it by what might have been more beneficial for me artistically here in the Bay Area. Didn't interest me.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, thanks for reminding that the period we're talking about now. . . . Certainly after your arrival in the Bay Area you were operating as a painter. Because again, most of us tend to think of you as a sculptor, and this is something of course you're gonna talk about later.

FLETCHER BENTON: I'll tell you something that's very interesting. I didn't start doing three—dimensional sculpture seriously till 1978.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, that's amazing.

FLETCHER BENTON: I bought my first welding machine in 1978. I did kinetic sculpture, but no welding; it was all glued together. They were considered to be wall pieces, two—dimensional. So from 1978 to, what are we now, '89?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Um hmm.

FLETCHER BENTON: Eleven years. And it's been an exciting eleven years.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, I think it's important to remember that you really did start out as a painter, and through your evolution there—again, we'll talk in much more detail this—but it seems that there was always a return, some connection to wall pieces, that your interest in paint, in color or _____ _____.

FLETCHER BENTON: Some of these [pieces] are two—dimensional.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Um hmm, yeah, exactly. But anyway, getting back to the situation here, you were almost abruptly, through opportunity and historical chance, moved into a different expression, one that moved you almost entirely out of the prevailing Bay Area setting—which in a sense precluded collecting by these very supportive patrons whom you've mentioned but that seemed to have a real interest in the regional expression. So it's almost academic, you know, it wasn't even a judgment. It seems to me there really isn't much of an issue involved here. You went your own way. You went a different direction. And that determined probably to a large extent then much of your subsequent career in terms of your relationship to the Bay Area.

FLETCHER BENTON: Definitely. If that hadn't of happened, and I had remained here, it would be interesting. I don't know what would have happened.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You said you were interested Joan Brown, whose work you saw, and do you remember what it was? Do you remember what it was about the work that you saw that struck you that way? Because you seemed to, from what you said, you were. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: Oh, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . it had a power. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: Tremendous impact.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What was it? Do you recall? Was it something you could express?

FLETCHER BENTON: Oh, I do recall. First of all, I didn't know Joan Brown very well then. I mean, I wasn't even sure when I'd see her at openings that that was her. But she has these penetrating blue eyes, like the heavens, you know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Um hmm.

FLETCHER BENTON: She was always very attractive. [She] always made me stand a little straighter. Well, anyway. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Back to the work.

FLETCHER BENTON: She had a huge painting that was figurative and it was done with a palette—knife—a painting knife. It wasn't a real palette—knife, it was a house painter's scraping knife that she picked up these luscious gobs of paint with and put these palette expressions on the canvas to support and shape the figure. It was beyond David Park. Beyond. Park's color was always a little dirty. This color was. . . . It was beautiful. It, you know, I want to say acidic. I guess it was acidic. The reds were acid. The yellows were acidic. It was rich, dynamic, big, powerful.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What year was this, do you remember?

FLETCHER BENTON: 'Sixty—four, maybe, '2, '3, '4?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Where was the. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: I'm not sure.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Where was the exhibition? This was what, a one—person show with _____ _____?

FLETCHER BENTON: No, it was the art annual.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Art annual. Early sixties.

FLETCHER BENTON: I think it was the year Bryan Wilson won first prize, got drunk, made a fool out of himself at the dinner. I don't know which year it was.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay. Anyway, you saw this work and. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: Jay DeFeo was painting then.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Sure.

FLETCHER BENTON: I mean all these people were there, at these annuals. Now if you could have had the experience of seeing one of these annuals, I mean, today it would be the most exciting thing that ever hit this town . . . the annuals that were happening in that period of four or five years. Dynamic work.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What I'm trying to get at here though is your relationship either on. . . . On a personal level you've already said that you didn't have an involvement with these artists for one reason or another. And so you would never describe yourself as part of that gang, despite the fact of course that you know many of them now, and some of them actually have been here in this very room, so that's not an issue—but that's a different thing we're talking about, more of a social thing. And you also stated that you were really impressed by some of the work that was being done. And yet I gather you didn't seek them [the artists] out or in any way feel that you needed to in your own work reflect these currents that were going on here. Is that right?

FLETCHER BENTON: That's true, and I think if there was anything that caused me to hang up my brushes and get rid of everything—which I did literally; got rid of everything, slashed most of my pictures—was that group of young artists. Roy DeForest. . . . I've never told them that. Roy, Joan Brown, what Diebenkorn was doing, and Nate Oliveira, and all those people. There were days that I'd go to my studio and work and I'd see the finished product on the wall, and I'd compare it to what I saw at the annuals and, you know. . . . And I was in several annuals, by the way. And it was heart— breaking. I just finally said "to hell," you know, "I can't go any farther with what I'm doing." And these people were booming on down the road, and doing what I would have liked to have done. And I just hung it up and went a different way. I probably would have done that anyway. I'm not saying that they caused me to be where I am today.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, I understand.

FLETCHER BENTON: But what they did was very inspiring and. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, inspiring, and I gather also discouraging to you.

FLETCHER BENTON: Yes, discouraging, right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Both at the same time, right. So I would have to, from the basis of what you said, I would have to say that the work that was going on, particularly of these younger people here in the Bay Area, had a very important impact or influence on you, and not quite in the way one usually suspects, which is then an attempt to absorb Diebenkorn's _____ and imitate him. That in fact it pushed you in a different direction.

FLETCHER BENTON: Further away from them.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Um hmm.

FLETCHER BENTON: It really did.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's interesting. So what was—I think we would have to say—what was a discouraging or frustrating experience for you, in fact turned out to be quite positive in your development.

FLETCHER BENTON: As we sit here and look back on it, yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right, okay.

FLETCHER BENTON: I still have this wonderful passionate love for painting. . . . Oh, boy. Well, can't do everything.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, we'll talk later, at some point, about the differences between the two: the 2-D and the 3-D. But moving on—you've described a situation here in the Bay Area, mainly in terms of painting; what about, what did you find around you in sculpture, in three-dimensional work that you recall? What was the situation with sculpture? By that time I imagine some of the funk [art] was beginning to develop.

FLETCHER BENTON: _____, the ceramic things were going on. DeForest was doing his marvelous things. [Pete Voulkos and Bob Arneson.] [Jack] Zajacks was working around, but not close enough here to make any difference. Isn't that funny, I can't think of many sculptors. The names. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, um hmm.

FLETCHER BENTON: Let me see that book.

[Tape 3, side A]

PAUL KARLSTROM: We were talking about the situation that you encountered when you moved here to the Bay Area. We talked a bit about painting and your relationship or, in some cases, lack of contact with the prominent features or communities here, your interest in painting. And you were beginning to talk about the situation with sculpture, what was going on here that you were aware of. And maybe you can recall some of the things that interested you? Presumably stimulated you to pursue some of your own directions.

FLETCHER BENTON: Well, those are good questions, Paul. I suppose the hardest thing I have, the hardest question I would have to answer now is who influenced me. At this point looking back at my work, who influenced my work? I don't know. To tie that in with your question, since I jumped from painting into the kinetic art thing, which was dealing with the surface of metal and the sterality of the. . . . Sterality, that's not right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Sterility.

FLETCHER BENTON: . . . the sterility of color and space and time and all that stuff. My work was very highly polished, very finished, very machine-like. I don't think any of the sculptors influenced me in the Bay Area. I liked very much what [Robert] Hudson was doing. I liked what [Wilfred] Zogbaum was all about. I liked very much Roy DeForest's three-dimensional pieces. But there wasn't any strong influence that I can recall.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you weren't aware. . . . Well again, I don't want to put words in your mouth.

FLETCHER BENTON: No. No, ask me.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Were you aware of sculptural activity, or activity in three dimensions, in the Bay Area?

FLETCHER BENTON: Um mm. [negative]

PAUL KARLSTROM: I mean, did you feel. . . . Was there anything that really struck your notice?

FLETCHER BENTON: No, not really.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did you know of say Jacques Schneir, for instance, working over at Berkeley?

FLETCHER BENTON: No, I didn't, until a few years ago. [chuckles] I kept hearing the name; I didn't make any association between the name and work. No. I knew about John Battenberg. I knew Sam Richardson was doing some three-dimensional pieces in resin. Bruce Beasley was casting aluminum, and then went to some other type things. But these were more contemporaries. And at that time, from about 1963 to 1973, that period of ten years, what I was doing was so removed from they were doing anywhere, except for just a couple little pockets in the world. Not that it was that great. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: _____ _____.

FLETCHER BENTON: . . . but it was just odd what my preoccupation was. It was kind of a machine art. And there were people doing machine art pieces. There was the aesthetic of several artists, but they were mostly Italian and South Americans.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you, what you're saying is that you were not stimulated by any sculptural activity here. . .

FLETCHER BENTON: No.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . to move you along in the direction that you took.

FLETCHER BENTON: I mean, Bruce Nauman. . . . Bruce and I showed in American Sculptures of the Sixties. That was the show of shows.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Um hmm, um hmm.

FLETCHER BENTON: And of course I've always liked the Claes Oldenburg things—less so now than then, but they were very dynamic then. And [Donald] Judd was doing his stuff, and you know, there was. . . . I wasn't swept off my feet by any one particular person.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Sounds to me like you were more interested in, more influenced or affected by, some of the painting of the people around the Art Institute—you mentioned Joan Brown—than by anything that was going on in three dimensions in sculpture here.

FLETCHER BENTON: True.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But I absolutely have to ask you about this, because we're talking about what is known as a fairly historic time in connection with sculpture, certainly with ceramics in the beginning—and that was in 1959, Peter Voulkos came up to set up the [ceramics] department at the University of California. He had been down at Otis and that story is well known. A lot is made out of that. The official view is that he had considerable influence on the area, on the Bay Area. He came up here, and most of the initial work I believe was with ceramics, and it would have been fairly early on that he started casting in bronze and building some of these larger pieces. My question is: Did this have anything to do with you at all? Were you aware of it? Did it make any difference what Pete Voulkos did?

FLETCHER BENTON: I was very aware of his bronze pieces. I was very taken by that series. There were some that moved me very much. I do not care for the piece down in front of the jail [San Francisco Municipal Court, Bryant Street] down here.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right, that we drove by today.

FLETCHER BENTON: Right. The piece the San Francisco Museum has, very nice piece. The Oakland Museum piece, dynamite piece. I've seen a few of his maquettes. They just are so wonderful. And, yes, I think he is very important. But he was casting; I never cast. My things, I had one cast piece; I didn't do it. My pieces were fabricated; it's a totally different process. A different way of thinking. Pete is the artists' artist. And he is, is still to this day, the man we all love and respect. I mean, he is the king. And, but no, I wasn't close to that group of people.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But you certainly. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: There were a few others working at Berkeley, but. . . . I mean, there was Harold Paris. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

FLETCHER BENTON: Harold and I have shown together from time to time. I was not close to Harold, but we did see each other. We did talk. He was a very neat guy, you know, he loved to talk and have a good time, and tear 'em up, and. . . . I think he was very innovative. I think he was frantic about being recognized. But that's okay. So was Dali. [both chuckle]

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's an interesting connection: Dali and Harold Paris _____.

FLETCHER BENTON: But I was not a part of the Berkeley school either. I mean, I really. . . . The more I'm pushed into the corner about where I belong, the more I don't know where I belong. I'm all of a sudden becoming very interested to find out myself, and I'm sure if I'm asked enough questions and talk long enough I'll find a spot, but I'm sure somewhere else [other than the Bay Area].

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, there are two parts to this and, you know, being aware of individuals and their work in no way says that that's equivalent to your position, or that you have to necessarily fit with Peter Voulkos or Jeremy Anderson [chuckles] or anybody. But one. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: Jeremy. By the way, Jeremy Anderson: dynamite. I liked his work very much.

PAUL KARLSTROM: He was doing some interesting things at the time, I believe.

FLETCHER BENTON: Yeah, terrific. The wooden pieces.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And there was actually, if one expands the definition of sculpture, I think there was really a lot more going on around here. It seemed to be a mixing of sculpture and painting to a large degree.

FLETCHER BENTON: Um hmm, yeah. And found object and. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Which may or may not have something to do with your work. I hope that we can talk about that a bit. But it does occur to me that at least it's a possibility that Peter Voulkos showing up here had to set some kind of an example, or call attention to—what's the term we can use?—the physicality of sculpture, the assertiveness, its occupying space. And, you know, my chronology of his work isn't all that good, but at some point he started doing some rather large-scale pieces which. . . . Well, I don't know; there had been Benny Bufano. I was going to say it hadn't been done before in the Bay Area. That's not true. There is some tradition of large-scale sculpture here. And what I am asking you, what I need to know, is did his [Voulkos'—Ed.] presence and his work in any way, as a model or an example, of the possibilities in sculpture, have any effect on you?

FLETCHER BENTON: I think that he was doing these things told all of us that if the desire is there, it can be done, because Pete did it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Um hmm. Like a, sort of like a role model, in a way.

FLETCHER BENTON: Yeah, exactly. Even today he affects me that way. He is such a powerful person. The best.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, what we're trying to do here—and it's necessarily a slow process, because you. . . . Because you—let's face it—you admit, you're not sure how you fit in. You're curious to find out.

FLETCHER BENTON: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I'm certainly curious to find out. That's what I'm doing here. And it's not exactly a process of elimination, but it's a groping, and what we do is turn first of all to the most obvious things—and we may get a response there, may not—but the most obvious figures or developments. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: But could I just say one thing, that you can pick up on later if you like?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Sure.

FLETCHER BENTON: I think what San Francisco and Bay Area has done for me is give me the freedom and the opportunity to be whoever I am. And I know that sounds maybe like a trite little statement, but I truly mean that. I was sitting here thinking, what if I had not left Jackson, Ohio—which we'll talk about—probably the biggest influence on me was in a back alley in Jackson, Ohio, to set a scene.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Good! Boy, now we [take] _____.

FLETCHER BENTON: But if I had left there and gone to, for instance, Louisville, Kentucky, or maybe to Cincinnati or to Columbus or to Dayton or some, something within the compass of my realm at that time, would it have challenged me? The Bay Area challenged me. The very fact there was so much going on and so much good art challenged me not to be so much a part of that, but to push me to be whatever I'm going to be. Good or bad, you know. I was very aggressive about making some kind of statement. And I believe very strongly that the more I did, the more I would find out who I was. So I've been very prolific, constantly trying to get enough in front of me so that I could make a judgment on myself. San Francisco allowed that to happen.

PAUL KARLSTROM: One of the things that I believe characterizes the Bay Area, perhaps almost uniquely, is an enormous capacity for experimentation—often failing, by the way, coming very short of the mark, but nonetheless this wide-open, imaginative environment. And I would suspect that this alone—and this is really following up on what you're saying—but this alone would serve as an enormous general influence without the specific influence of any individual.

FLETCHER BENTON: You know, I'm smiling because it's like one big Bay to Breakers situation, you know, really. [laughing]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, that's an interesting analogy!

FLETCHER BENTON: Yeah, it really is.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You can't say that any of the runners or costumes in the race necessarily specifically had an impact or influence on you. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: And they don't really compete against each other; they're just sort of stimulated by each other to, you know, to get some, to get to the end of the race. [still laughing]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah. That is an interesting analogy. And certainly the spirit of Bay to Breakers. . . . Which I suppose certainly to whoever's listening to the tape, because they may not know that this is this giant [annual] race that's become sort of like a gigantic city party, street party, with some serious racing [runners] but basically San Franciscans just doing wild things. And anyway, this analogy seems very appropriate, very apt because there can be an environmental influence on any individual that isn't tied necessarily to the breakthrough or the discovery of the work of any individual, but each of those individuals is contributing to this ambience.

FLETCHER BENTON: Um hmm.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And, unless I misunderstand you, you're acknowledging that this ambience is probably critical to you as a creative person.

FLETCHER BENTON: It wouldn't have happened in Dayton, Ohio. And it wouldn't have happened in Columbus, Ohio. And I'm not sure it would happen in Kansas City. [laughs]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, I think not. I mean, I hope what we're agreeing [to] here is that this quality of imagination and experimentation and sort of free-wheeling, gutsy, try-everything approach, which is characteristic of this area, made for a very fertile environment for you.

FLETCHER BENTON: You know, there's a lot of attention given to San Francisco through the poets.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Um hmm, that's right.

FLETCHER BENTON: And through the musicians that came through. I mean, it wasn't just the Art Institute.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But basically, we see now that you really don't feel. . . . If I asked you how do you fit in to this situation in the Bay Area—and I think you basically answered it—you would say, "Well, really not at all." There's no individual with whom you identify. You certainly weren't collaborating with anybody. You don't feel directly influenced in an important way by any individual. And so there it is: how do you fit in? Well, comfortably but not specifically, in terms of direct influence. You don't fit in.

FLETCHER BENTON: I think that's fair.

PAUL KARLSTROM: [chuckles]

FLETCHER BENTON: If we have to measure art in decades, and decades and centuries, and artists by their locality, regional or otherwise, and by their influences, well, I don't know where I am. I don't believe in that, by the way.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And that's all right, anyway. There is another idea California art—even beyond this Bay Area art. And I think. . . . I [almost] hesitate to bring this up, because I think it's something that we'll grapple with throughout the interview—and this is not an attempt to put a label on you; I'm not interested in that. But we all draw from various sources and in different proportions, and the fact is that you're associated with, you reside in California, you've made a conscious choice. You have connections with Southern California as well. And there is this idea of California art. For you, what is that? Whether or not you see yourself as part of it.

FLETCHER BENTON: Well, I can answer that very well. I know if I was doing sculpture in New York, it would not be like it is here. Because the very physical part of getting a sheet of steel from the guy that sells it to my studio was—ground floor or otherwise—is a major, major job. And the fact that, you know, I would probably be working with small pieces of metal, which are drops and so forth that I picked up from some fabricating shop. I would probably have very limited welding equipment. I probably would be doing mostly pedestal pieces. If I did do a big piece, it could only be done when I got a commission and I could have Lippincott build it. Whereas here, I have the luxury of calling up and having a semi-truck pull up in front of my studio, we get that steel off, we bring it in the building, and we can take those flat sheets and make anything we want out of it. I don't think that's true in New York. In fact, I am dead sure it's not true in New York. Serra probably takes his paper maquettes to a steel guy and says, "This is what I want," you know. "Make it happen." I know Tony Smith did that. Because

Tony told me personally he did that. He had models, he took ‘em to Pace, Pace took ‘em to Lippincott, and Lippincott built ‘em, and that was it. In fact one show Tony said he didn’t even know what was going to be in the show, and I said, “Why is that?” and he said, “Well, I don’t know. I gave the models to the gallery. I don’t know which pieces they’ll put in the show.” He had no idea what was going to be in the show. Because his control was gone soon as he’d finished the paper model.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Um hmm.

FLETCHER BENTON: And if you look at his work, you can see there’s no accident in it. I mean, it has to be what it is. There’s no chance for chance. Whereas in my work as I’m doing it, I quite often change it. There’s a little bit of chance in every piece I do, a little bit of discovery, little bit of that stuff, you know, that’s fun. It goes beyond model making and paper work and, and/or that sort of thing. I think. . . . That’s what California’s given [me]. It’s given me the ability to do whatever I can afford to do here with no restriction—or little restrictions, or not as many restrictions—as New York or Chicago or some other place.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, what you’re talking about there, of course, is very practical, the physical side of it. You know, what the environment allows you to do, and also the economics involved. The [time] and space.

FLETCHER BENTON: But that sometimes determines the direction artists take indirectly.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

FLETCHER BENTON: You know, it molds them into different. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: And this certainly applies in the area of sculpture where you’re involved in, it involves heavy material, space, the business of moving things around, and working materials. And obviously that’s very important. But what about something a little more ambiguous and perhaps spiritual, and that is the idiom of the art of California? Is there something in the, in California art—whether it be sculpture or painting—the expression here, that might differ from elsewhere. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: There is.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . that you would respond to.

FLETCHER BENTON: There is. In California you don’t have the pressure and the restrictions of conformity that you have in New York. We talked about it earlier.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay.

FLETCHER BENTON: It doesn’t exist here. It does exist in New York. That, there’s so many people there. There’s so much going on. There’s all the art magazines, the powerful art dealers are there, the museums, and everything else is there. Therefore the pressure is equally geared to that. You don’t have that in California.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you don’t feel though that there’s any theme or type of theme that runs through expression in California art? I realize it’s not all the same.

FLETCHER BENTON: Yes, I think there is.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That would distinguish it from art produced [out of] state.

FLETCHER BENTON: I think if you took ten New York artists—and I think you would agree—and ten California artists, and you mixed ‘em up in a show, you can tell exactly which was New York and which was California.

PAUL KARLSTROM: How would you tell that?

FLETCHER BENTON: Well, with me it’s sort of just a gut feeling. It’s like visual Braille. . . . There’s a freer [sensibility in California]. A lot of people say, “Well, the light is different out here; therefore the colors are paler.” Well, I don’t quite go along with that. I mean, it, maybe there’s more color here. [pauses, thinking] Interestingly enough, one might say California is a casual place; therefore the art should be more casual. I disagree with that. I think the art is infinitely more formal in California than casual. You think about that. It’s a very interesting statement for you to think about. Ed Ruscha, typical example of what we were talking about earlier. If you look at his work, it’s highly formal.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, that’s right.

FLETCHER BENTON: Billy Al Bengston, very formal. Chuck Arnoldi. If you really look hard, it’s very formal.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I agree, but of course you realize. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: Now, in New York, it's less formal.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I think I would agree, but it's interesting that the examples you cite are all Los Angeles artists. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: Well, that's. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . and I wonder if you would say the same thing about the Bay Area.

FLETCHER BENTON: No, I would not. I'm. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: I think that's interesting.

FLETCHER BENTON: I wasn't even aware of.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I think it's interesting, and I think it's extremely revealing, because I would venture. . . . I would ask you, straight out right now, do you feel more of a rapport with the expression in the Los Angeles area over that in the Bay Area?

FLETCHER BENTON: Yes, if I had to choose, I would say, where do I belong, here or there, I would have to say in Los Angeles. But I don't feel I belong there either.

PAUL KARLSTROM: No, but you. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: But more so.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Because you're talking about formalism and all that, and. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: It has to do with. . . . I think if you're very casual, you need to tighten up a little bit. If you're very uptight, you escape through loosening up. And, you know, there's a thread that runs through—this is very personal thinking, as far as I'm concerned—works of art that stimulate me—and that thread is invisible yet revealing in many ways—that has to do with classicism, classic. . . . I don't want to use the word "formal." I want to say classic. You could push me to formal in certain areas, but it's a classic sense about things. And I think that as casual as Californians are, the art out here, with one exception now—you know, on the funk people up here, that whole Art Institute thing, is very New York. And the reason it's very New York is the New York people came out here and planted all their seeds. [Clyfford] Still, [Mark Rothko—Ed.], all those guys who left their mark so indelibly at the Art Institute that even to this day it's not erasable. You paint over it, it bleeds through the paint. And there's no way it goes away. So in a sense, California, whatever the Art Institute represents, may not be California. It may be New York. What was transplanted here by those key people.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It's very interesting what you're saying, because I'm sure you're aware of the fact that many observers. . . . You're taking a slightly different perspective of it. Many observers talk about L.A. art as [in terms of] an L.A./New York nexus or network. And that it's exactly on the idea of, well, minimalism. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: Minimalism is not New York. In my opinion.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I mean, there's certainly some connections there as well, but what you get is the L.A. artists dealing with New York issues. Like post-painterly abstraction was much more evident in L.A. and in New York than in the Bay Area, that the Bay Area seems to diverge on those issues. You get somebody like a Ron Davis, for instance, or Craig Kauffman, and all these people that the criticism of the time, of the sixties, would invariably [connect with certain] issues, concerns, so-called major issues. The Bay Area almost never was mentioned in connection with these issues. Anyway it's food for thought because what you're doing is presenting a kind of a twist on this, which is provocative; it's interesting. A different way of looking at it.

FLETCHER BENTON: I mean, San Francisco's a very Frenchy kind of place.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Frenchy?

FLETCHER BENTON: Frenchy. You know, Frenchy art.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What do you mean by that? I have to bite. I have to bite. [chuckles]

FLETCHER BENTON: Well, you know, it's kinda. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: You mean like Paris?

FLETCHER BENTON: Yeah. It's Frenchy. It's. . . . Los Angeles is not Frenchy.

PAUL KARLSTROM: No.

FLETCHER BENTON: San Francisco's a little Frenchy.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You think in a way Los Angeles art is in fact more open, and San Francisco art, despite the openness of opportunity, is more closed or introspective. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: Yes, yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . and turning on itself?

FLETCHER BENTON: Very much. Very much.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Which of course is, to my mind, absolutely the total opposite of your work, and your expression—which is, well, it's basically a very clear statement. Well, it's not my business to say what I think [it is].

FLETCHER BENTON: Well, of course it is. Why not?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, because the interview is with you.

FLETCHER BENTON: Oh.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But I do know that, once again, the way you percieve or describe characateristics of Bay Area art, usually it's in terms that are quite different from the way I think you percieve your own art, or the way I've just described my own response to it. So there is an interesting, really quite a gulf, that seems to separate—at least at this stage anyway—that seems to separate your work from the prevalent mode here, and that in fact one could draw more evident connections with some of the expressions in Southern California, some of your colleagues, people that you know.

FLETCHER BENTON: I'm certainly closer to John McLaughlin than Richard Diebenkorn.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Great artist to be close to, John McLaughlin.

FLETCHER BENTON: I made a special trip to meet him. You know, another interesting thing about. . . . I think, the Los Angeles scene and the San Francisco scene are as far removed as what was going on in Italy and what was going on in France, you know. At any one period you want to choose. [chuckles] It was similar but quite far apart. The interesting thing about the West coast and the East coast that I've found—that is to say Los Angeles/San Francisco connecting with Boston or New York or whatever; leave Washington [D.C.?—Ed.]—I have found that New York artists are the greatest describers of their art of any group. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Very verbal.

FLETCHER BENTON: Oh! Terribly verbal. I mean, New Yorkers, you ask anyone that's an artist there to talk, and they can talk your arm off. I don't think Californians are too good at talking about their stuff. And most of my artists friends that I see regularly, we never talk about art stuff.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Um hmm.

FLETCHER BENTON: My Los Angeles friends I love and see, we never talk art stuff.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You know, I think that's right.

FLETCHER BENTON: And you being an art historian, many of these people are your close friends. You go out with them, you don't talk art.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Never.

FLETCHER BENTON: You try to do that in New York.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, I know, I know.

FLETCHER BENTON: _____, you're dead. [laughing] I mean, it's like two-thirds of their statement is what they have to say, verbally, about it. [laughs]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, we'll pursue that, because I think it's an important distinction.

MAY 3, 1989
[Tape 3, side B]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Fletcher, yesterday we talked about, oh, a number of things. We dwelt a while on the issue of regionalism, because you are a San Franscisco-based artist. And then we began to move into your experience in California, your recollections of what was here when you arrived and what kind of interaction you had, one way or the other, with other artists, with the art community, the patrons, your response to painting, your description of some of the things that interested you, what was going on here, and then we were beginning to talk about sculpture, because of course there was a point when you began to shift from the two-dimensional and finally some of the work which brought attention to you. I gather that this really for you began to happen in the early sixties, this shift from painting, I mean, the flat surface, two dimensional, and beginning to move it. And which was a very important time. There was that big exhibition: Sculpture in the Sixties, I think it was called. And I believe you participated in that show? That was at L.A. County Museum?

FLETCHER BENTON: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right. So just to give some historical context to this, the sixties seemed to be an important decade for some developments in sculpture. More attention was perhaps being paid at that time than before. What I would like to do is get, briefly, your view of the situation. And that means American sculpture, not just Bay Area, but American sculpture at the time that you began to become involved. And if I may I'd like to start out by reading what Tom Albright—the late critic, Tom Albright—who wrote of course this important book, Art in the San Francisco Bay Area, 1945 to 1980 [Thomas Albright, Art in the San Francisco Bay Area, 1945-1980, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985, p. 137—Ed.], that's what I'm quoting from, his observations on the situation at that time, and then just get your reaction to it. See if it stimulates any thought. So I'm quoting Albright here:
There were several reasons why the physical nature of sculpture had a strong appeal to artists in the early 1960s. In an age when so many kinds of artistic expression were competing for attention, it was a sure-fire attention-grabber. The new connoiseur of contemporary art was young, impatient, and on the move, and one caught his attention with art that he might trip over or bump into, art that physically moved by itself or threatened to engulf him. Much contemporary sculpture was therefore a branch of show business. Beyond this, sculpture seemed to offer more new avenues for exploration than painting did, and seemed more responsive to the expansive mood of the times. Space-age technology produced an entire range of new materials and processes: titanium and fiberglass, vacuum forming, computer programming.
Okay, that. . . what do you think about that observation?

FLETCHER BENTON: Oh, I don't think it's true at all.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay, why?

FLETCHER BENTON: As far as the space-age materials, I don't know of any artist that was exhibiting about, that was into what would be space-age materials. Fiberglass, body putty, stuff like that was not space-age stuff, you know. I mean, they've been making the Corvettes out of fiberglass long before that. Boats. It was a very common thing. As far as those people that were doing kinetic art that's so slightly referred to there as show business, I think that's not quite fair, because there weren't that many and I think they were using motion not as an attention-getter, but more an artistic ingredient. In fact, the whole kinetic movement was based on the fact that time and space were being used as aesthetic elements. I was trying to get to Naum Gabo, and the manifesto that was written I think around 1919, 1921, that said essentially that along with the Futurists, the poets, and the whole thing going on that they no longer accepted art as purely two-dimensional, three-dimensional statements, but considered the fourth dimension of time and space. So, no, it simply is not true. It's a clip; it's a foul to say that. I mean, his statement is more an attention-getter than the [supposed] show biz involved [in what] the artists were doing, that's according to him.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What then would be your description of the situation in the early sixties as you became involved.

FLETCHER BENTON: I think the sixties reflected the breakaway from the New York school and Abstract Expressionism. And I think the sixties will show some giants but it will also show miles and miles of Italian chrome and Italian polish and Italian thinking, the Plexiglas. It's not all Italian, but I use that because it sort of really did come out of that Italian mentality.

PAUL KARLSTROM: The high-style [in Milan]?

FLETCHER BENTON: Yeah, high. . . . Right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: [Lamberghini]. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: And if there was anything that was high-tech that Tom is pointing at, I think it's directly there, you know. I mean, Italians are the world's greatest designers when it comes to that sort of thing. And so there was a lot of polished metal, and there certainly was a hell of a lot of resin and Plexiglas stuff. I used them. I used polished metal. I used clear Plexiglas that was painted with transparent acrylic laquers in order to deal with what I was interested in: the movement of color and space. And since these art objects needed a frame, needed something to hold the motors and all the rest of the stuff, I got involved with trying to make that frame something more than just a plain black box, so I started designing the frame that hid the motors that made the color move in space. So I would probably be considered very much a part of that Plexiglas and shine decade. But there were also, some other really tight stuff came out of it, you know. Pop Art. Didn't Pop Art come out of the sixties? You know, we had quite a few things going on there. But more so, I think the sixties reflected that the artist was sick and tired of the iron fist [with which] the dealers of the Abstract Expressionist movement of the New York school handed the entire country. You couldn't even show unless you were a part of that family of Abstract Expressionism. I mean, if you were doing something that was not related, forget it. You weren't going to be included in the show. So when that finally broke the cartel, then there were so many artists throughout the United States [that] at least had a chance to get their stuff seen. I think that's the important thing about the sixties. More than anything else, they broke the grip that New York had on what we saw in the United States that was considered fine art. And by the way, there was nothing in sculpture coming out of New York, except David Smith. I mean, who else?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Um hmm.

FLETCHER BENTON: And he was coming out not in force, but he was making his mark.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Basically you're saying—well, you're saying several things—but one of them is that most of the interesting activity in sculpture really was outside of New York, that there was really. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: Oh, definitely.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . less experimentation, less working with materials and the three dimensions, in New York city.

FLETCHER BENTON: Absolutely. There was more going on on the West coast in sculpture. In a three-dimensional statement.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

FLETCHER BENTON: I mean, New York was all wrapped up in earthworks. They were wrapped up in performance art. And there was the [Marcel] Duchamp influence, which is the heady thing that New York is always wrapped up in. And I think California was somewhat free from that. And there was a concern for the object, for the surface, for the presentation. . . . I'm not going to use the word slick. That was the word that was used, and when you refer to the sixties that's a word [that] keeps popping up. I'm not sure it's a fair word.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, but attention to shall we say craft and finish and an interest in materials. . . . Let me ask you this: Do you feel then that there were other underlying reasons for the use of some of these different materials. It does seem to me, or seem to us, looking back, that new materials were introduced in an imaginative way into art. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: But they weren't new materials. They were new to the art statement, but they were not new materials.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, that's what I said. That's what I'm saying. The fact that they, there has been then, they were chosen, they were validated. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . to be included in an art statement is important. My question is this: Was it because of an interest in the materials themselves and in certain aesthetic qualities that could be achieved by combining them, or were there other underlying reasons that these materials were used—other than availability? What about in your own case? Was it that you were primarily attracted to these materials, or did they seem to do something that you wanted them to do for an idea? Express or idea, or. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: Well, I wanted a clean look. I used a lot of polished metal because I wanted the encasement of the mechanism to reflect what was around it. Therefore it had less volume, less visual weight. I mean, there were very solid reasons why I did that. And also there were many other guys working with stainless steel, polished aluminum, Plexiglas, and stuff who were doing it, I think because if you wanted something transparent, you were foolish to use glass because it breaks. There's only one other thing you can use, and that's a clear

Lucite, a clear Plexiglas, you know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Very practical.

FLETCHER BENTON: Yeah, they could get transparency and not get breakage.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It's also lighter.

FLETCHER BENTON: But that wasn't the reason. The reason was breakage. I mean, all the framers started using Plexiglas. There was some big thing about, you know, the artists have turned to plastic.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What did you. . . . Go ahead.

FLETCHER BENTON: And I think they used stainless steel and a lot of aluminum because the metals did not rust. And stainless steel could be glued. There was some space-age glues that were used in fighter aircraft that had very high temperature strength and very low temperature strength. And especially with my work, I could attach stainless steel. I didn't do any welding till 1978. All my sculptures were glued together, essentially, over wooden frames. Some of the people I knew that were working in these metals—there was a certain respect for the material. You had a respect for stainless. You had a respect for bronze. You had a respect for aluminum. Steel is forever. It's a heavy metal that can be abused. You can do damn near anything you want to to steel. And you can go back and fix it. It's a marvelous metal. It's a metal that can be violated. And there just was not anything going on in New York, that I'm aware of—there may have been a few little pockets of stuff—that dealt with any other metal than steel. And it was usually put together. You see, you can weld steel with a very inexpensive device. They're called crackerboxes and slang for a little stick welder that you can buy for a few hundred dollars. And at least you can stick steel together. So if you could find small parts and get a little crackerbox welder, you could do it in your room or wherever. It ran off of 110 voltage. And you could stick little pieces together. So there were little pieces stuck together and painted. The metal was never anything more than something that could be melted together and be free-standing. It was not a metal that was respected or used for its surface.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Um hmm.

FLETCHER BENTON: I think the only artist that was doing anything. . . . Now, I shouldn't say only.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But one of the few.

FLETCHER BENTON: Yeah, in the fifties, was this guy [Lassau], you remember him?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, _____.

FLETCHER BENTON: That soldered little pieces of [brass together].

PAUL KARLSTROM: [Ibram].

FLETCHER BENTON: Ibram. [No, that's not right. OR: Lassau _____.] . . . It's called tree sculpture.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Um hmm, um hmm.

FLETCHER BENTON: Marisol was doing great things. Mary Bauermeister was doing what? I mean I think Mary Bauermeister and Marisol were the two leading women artists—along with Louise Nevelson. Marisol and Bauermeister were, I think, probably getting more recognition. I could be wrong about that. I probably shouldn't say that, but they were certainly up there.

PAUL KARLSTROM: These are the ones that you were aware of.

FLETCHER BENTON: Yes. And Mary Bauermeister was the poet, you know, was the person who was thrown in with the Constructivist movement, who worked with lenses and worked with distortion and worked stone. She worked with beads and all sorts of things that she was able to assemble, and she would put them in boxes and then draw in the boxes. Are you familiar with her work?

PAUL KARLSTROM: I've seen a few things. I'm not real familiar, no.

FLETCHER BENTON: Well, if you get a chance, you should try to dig into Mary Bauermeister. She's still alive. She was married to [Karlheinz] Stockhausen [the composer]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, yeah?

FLETCHER BENTON: Yeah [chuckles], it was her second husband. And. . . . But Mary Bauermeister was very

talented. She's not doing any more work that way. She's doing gardens. She's designing gardens and so forth in Europe. And is not with Stockhausen any longer. And Marisol we all know of her work. I mean, I thought she was terrific. And Louise Nevelson, the dynamic things that she was able to accomplish in her lifetime.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Were you familiar with Nevelson's work in the early sixties?

FLETCHER BENTON: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Um hmm. Because it occurs to me that she had surfaced, so to speak, and was actually—well, this may be, this is more the myth—maybe late sixties, was visiting California, certainly had become pretty well known. I seem to remember that this was about the time that she became prominent.

FLETCHER BENTON: But she didn't use metal [until] well into the seventies. Right, and I'm sure there're many more. I haven't done my homework, Paul.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, that's all right.

FLETCHER BENTON: I bet if I picked up a book I could find lots of examples, but I don't think sculpture was doing that well. I don't think it. . . . When Tom [Albright] referred to it [he indicated that] everybody was jumping on the bandwagon. What I personally think caused everybody to jump on the bandwagon in terms of sculpture has been the fact that certain communities have a one-percent law for the arts, and I think the fact that architects were putting more stuff out in front of their buildings, and all of a sudden you have Sculpture International, and you can see in one issue maybe fifty, sixty fabricators—art students who have gone out and couldn't make it so they make other people's art.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

FLETCHER BENTON: Foundries, fabricators, what-have-you, installers. So to be a sculptor these days, you can be like Tony Smith. All you need is a card table, pair of scissors, some glue, and paper. You stick something together, send it off to a fabricator, and he builds it for you. There are very few sculptors in this country that are committed to the full process, where you've got it all hangin' out. There just aren't that many. If I were in my right mind, I wouldn't be doing it. You can hear the grinders going down there right now.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, I know! [laughs]

FLETCHER BENTON: It's probably ruining your tape.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh well, as long as we can hear what you have to say. [chuckles] It's sort of part of the ambience.

FLETCHER BENTON: Yeah. Well, I chose to do my own fabrication because I didn't know any better. But now that I'm committed to it—and believe me I'm committed. I mean, it's just a bottomless pit of dumping money. There's no, you never have enough money for it. I do have the benefit of saying, "Wait a minute. That's wrong. Cut it out, take it off, throw it away, or change it." If you're sending it out to a fabricator, you don't have that opportunity, unless you're willing to pay through the nose—and where every change is triple the cost.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Is the difference that. . . . I mean, you do have people assisting you, because you have a staff.

FLETCHER BENTON: They're all artists and, yes, they do help. A lot.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But is the difference the fact that they are working directly with you, under you, here on the premises, and that in many of these other cases the design goes out and really that's the end of the direct involvement of the artist.

FLETCHER BENTON: True.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Is this what you're describing?

FLETCHER BENTON: True. I mean, the artist goes there and stands around, and you've seen Louise Nevelson up at Lippincott walking around and with a grinding shield over her face, and. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: She's an observer, though.

FLETCHER BENTON: Well, sometimes you'll see her take a, strike a weld, or do something, but believe me that ain't doin' it. But you go there and you look and see what somebody else has done. You point a lot.

PAUL KARLSTROM: [chuckles] One of the things—not that I want to keep invoking Tom Albright—but another observation he made, difference between, you know, East coast and the West coast, along the lines perhaps of what you were suggesting just now, is that the West coast sculptors, artists, tended to be more involved, actually working with the materials. The artist, the creator, actually grappled, if you will, with the materials, and that this was really quite unusual, to find, in New York—or maybe in Europe; I don't know about that. _____.

FLETCHER BENTON: Well, let's think about that. I mean, just think. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay, let's _____. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: I think he's right. I think he's dead right. Edward Lucie-Smith brought up a point, which I have since given quite a lot of thought to, that painting in the United States definitely [has] umbilical ties to Europe and European painting. Sculpture in America does not. I never thought of it that way, but I believe that that is true the more I think about, that the sculptors came out of a can-do society. The British call it can-do; we call it do-it-yourself. I mean, the guys, most of the guys that were working in sculpture, came out of all sorts of model airplane building, hotrods, the car, romance with the car, with the assurance that they could, if they wanted to do something they could figure out how to do it themselves. Whereas in Europe, sculptors don't do that. Sculptors have foundries that they send their work to. They're not involved in the process of actually doing it. So. . . . I believe that is the case and therefore those people in New York, those three-dimensional people, didn't have the opportunity to be as involved in the work as we do on the West coast. Why? One, because it's a seasonal place. And if they're working outside they've only got so many months out the year they can work outside, if they're doing anything of size. If they're in and around New York city, chances are they aren't even going to have enough space to do too much. Their materials are limited, because of, as I mentioned yesterday, getting the materials to and from a supplier in New York is no simple task—especially if you're an artist who doesn't have a lot of money. You've got to go to scrap yards, you've gotta find metal—however. And then, you've got to get it in your studio and when you get it in your studio, and when you get it in your studio, you have to weld it. Then you have to grind it, then you have a neighbor saying, "Why are you grinding? It's getting dust all over my couch. It's way too much noise. Take that shit somewhere else." So that there is really no freedom there. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: That comes back to the idea of freedom, which we were talking about.

FLETCHER BENTON: Yes. So the West coast guys had freedom and the New Yorkers were calling it the frontier. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Which is everywhere out of. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: In Pennsylvania, wherever you were. I mean, there were other places, but since we were really referring now to the West coast as opposed to the East coast, out here, as you know, we have separate buildings. You can go rent. . . . We have industrial parks. I don't think they had industrial parks in the sixties back east. I could be wrong, but I'm from the east; I don't remember industrial parks. That's a very California thing. So you could go rent a section in an industrial park.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And not bother anybody.

FLETCHER BENTON: That's right. The guy next to you may be, may be doing body work. The guy next to him may be laying up fiberglass for a boat. So you come in there and weld up some steel and do some grinding, who cares? So we had. . . . The physical part, that is required to be a sculptor and have the freedom, was already here. So it did make a difference. I mean, we were not restricted the way they were on the East coast—or the way they are in Europe. The farther east you go [chuckles] the more this is true.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's interesting, and it raises the question of what you mentioned, car culture, and that is associated with most of America, but outside of New York city. That which is quintessentially American is not really a part of what is supposed to be America's great urban center.

FLETCHER BENTON: [Certainly].

PAUL KARLSTROM: And you also mentioned fiberglass and working up the hull of a boat, for instance, in this industrial park you're talking about. And it raises an interesting question, which I'd like to put to you. Do you feel that American recreation—I'll use that term, recreation—leisure time, tools and instruments of leisure time—and I'm going to use the automobile as an example of that, not just transportation for work—but something in which America enjoys itself, moves around, boats—obviously that's evident—finally, surfboards. These different tools of pleasure and recreation, do you see a connection between them—they are three-dimensional things; some of them move—and the development of certain attitudes towards sculpture and the time we're talking about? First of all in general, but in your work.

FLETCHER BENTON: In the sixties, [you mean]?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Um hmm.

FLETCHER BENTON: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Um hmm. What do you think about that notion?

FLETCHER BENTON: Well, I just wanted to say one thing. We talked yesterday about how I never really fit in out here.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Um hmm.

FLETCHER BENTON: I mean, I accept the fact that I didn't really fit in in California. And to this day I don't fit it. That's okay. It's a beautiful place to live. I don't need to fit in. That's not why I came here. But I was thinking as we were talking that I am somewhere between my developing years in the East and the freedom of the West.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You were born where?

FLETCHER BENTON: In Ohio.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah. Um hmm.

FLETCHER BENTON: And I think that I am probably more in my thought process an East coast or European thinker than I am a West coast. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Really!

FLETCHER BENTON: Yeah. I think I am. My ties are closer to the whole Constructivist thing that's going on in Europe, and I think that my materials have ultimately reached a substantial, traditional group of materials. But that's not what you asked me.

PAUL KARLSTROM: No, but I. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: I think the surfboard, sailboard, roller skate board, the dragsters, and all that stuff does have an effect on all of us. I mean, just the aircraft industry alone. The center of it is California. The movie industry and that whole thing in the fifties and sixties with the cars, the beach, the broads. You know, I mean that's. . . . No offense, I'm using a sixties term, everybody.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, after all, we're talking about the sixties.

FLETCHER BENTON: Right. But I think it goes back again to what Edward Lucie-Smith brought out, as we were talking one day, and that is the pioneer spirit that came here with the pilgrims and all that baloney, and it's built the country, and that it's done all these great things, has been a pioneering spirit that's not dragging along a lot of baggage. And I think that, especially in sculpture, this is true, that the sculptors here, the guys who are working with their hands and making something that is three-dimensional, are not dragging along a lot of traditional baggage. So in a way they don't have to overcome their tradition, you know, their social boundaries. I mean, we have no tradition here in sculpture. None.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Would you say that this is more true of the situation in California. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . on the western frontier. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: It is more true.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . than the East coast?

FLETCHER BENTON: We are more free here. We have less tradition here, because the people in New York city—and I don't even want to use the East coast. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: All right.

FLETCHER BENTON: The New York scene is directly tied to Europe. I mean, the European collectors for years didn't know California existed. They still aren't coming to us. So they come to New York and they stop there. They buy and reflect and are turned on to what they relate most to, which is the European way of thinking in art. You know, it's the. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: You said a moment ago, upon reflection, [that you] feel more tied to the East, and finally to Europe, than you do to. . . .

[Tape 4, side A]

PAUL KARLSTROM: I asked you a question a few moments ago, before we had to change tapes, that had to do with your comment that you felt, despite your long residence here, fundamentally more tied to the East and perhaps even to Europe than California. And I'm wondering if you can explain what you mean by that—and hopefully beyond the fact that you've been involved in making your own sculpture, fabricating, which we've already pointed to as a non-New York, a California habit. So that would [seem to] undercut what you said. There must be some other reason that you feel more tied to Europe and to the east. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: Well, I don't know of many sculptors that came to the West coast and became West coast people, you know, that were able to absorb the beach, the sunshine, the freeways, the car mentality, the movie mentality. Except I know that Chuck Arnoldi came from Dayton, Ohio, but. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Um hmm.

FLETCHER BENTON: I mean, a lot of these guys were. . . . Well, DeWain [Valentine] came here from Colorado. How can I answer that question? I live and work here, but my aesthetic has more of a classical sense to it. At least I think it does. I don't know if other people feel that way or not. . . . There's a certain traditional kind of classic direction that I try to achieve. And I think it's. . . . Did I use the word traditional? Because I feel [that] is important in my work. And you might say, "Well, what do you mean by traditional?" and I'm not sure I could tell you. It may be because of the geometry, maybe because of the way I compose and deal with forms and space. But I do try to achieve a classical sense about it. I think that that sense is more, is certainly more European, and in a way I think more eastern. What do you think of that? I mean, do you see what I'm saying?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, I think we. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: I don't know if I can be specific. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: I'd like to pursue this a little, but of course we're using terms that you almost have to come up with your working definition at the moment. But you use the term classical and I am suspecting you want to contrast that against its so-called opposite, the romantic impulse, and that presumably from what you say you would associate much of California art with a kind of romanticism, well, rather than certainly classical ideas of structure, and this kind of thing. More emotional, and the classical is more formal and structural. Is this. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: I think that's very fair. I'm glad I asked you, because you said it pretty good there.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, I'm an art historian.

FLETCHER BENTON: Oh. [chuckles]

PAUL KARLSTROM: But do you feel then that your work—describing yourself—is devoid of emotion? I mean, in our earlier conversations I got the sense that there was this important force running through it, in terms of your artistic intention to a degree, which was emotional and subjective, seeking a kind of response.

FLETCHER BENTON: I am seeking a visual response, yes, and. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: But not an emotional one.

FLETCHER BENTON: Well, what. . . . Well, let me ask you a question. I mean, I would say it was emotional.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Um hmm.

FLETCHER BENTON: I mean, for me it is. If you look at something and you feel good about it, do you consider that an emotional. . . . I mean, you feel moved by it, or good about, or you feel at rest with it, do you. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: At rest. At rest is a good term to use for the classical.

FLETCHER BENTON: Or you feel turned off by it. Is that considered an emotion?

PAUL KARLSTROM: The classical. . . . We could really get into a long discussion.

FLETCHER BENTON: No, but I'm, we're talking about emotion. I'm trying to say that I'm dealing with geometry, and that is about as pure and unemotional as you can get—unless you want to get back to when the guy and the gal fell out of the trees and put some pebbles around the ground and drew a circle and pointed up to the moon

or the sun. But no, geometry is very unemotional, but I think it can be assembled and put together in such a way that their relationships to each other get some emotional response. It may be similar to—back to music—what you might feel emotionally when you get a series of notes that stimulates you, or something like that. It's not a big thing, you know; it's. . . . I mean, you can't take geometry and get the emotional impact that you can with romantic elements, you know, the romantic school, certainly.

PAUL KARLSTROM: There's a wildness and sometimes a sense of, well, even chaos, and certainly energy and activity that one associates with the romantic direction. There's no absolute involved in here. But with the classical—again, trying to relate it to your work and your goals—I would suggest that the classical tends to, certainly evokes a response, but it's one of organization and order, an underlying order in things.

FLETCHER BENTON: Ah. Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Which then can be a reassuring thing, something to hold onto. I would say romantic tends be often more disturbing, playing on the emotional side, unstable, as opposed to classical, which is, again, more of a carefully constructed sort of. . . . Rooted, tied down to a foundation, to give you some bearings.

FLETCHER BENTON: Well, let me say this. I. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Please disagree if I. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: No, no, I think that's very good. I try to set my sculptures up in such a way that if you removed any part of it, it can't, it's not what it was. So that each element needs to be there. Now to arrive at that point, is sometimes very difficult, difficult for me. They may look. . . . Parts of them look random, and I suppose the test is to remove one to try to prove the point. The piece still exists with the same visual impact, but that element removed or another, or something else added to it, then I haven't done what I started out to do. So, yes, it is order, it is balance, and in some of pieces there's humor—at least for me. They make me laugh sometimes. Not always. And in others it's very serious, it's very heavy and very serious.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What are the issues involved? Everything that has been created is focusing, for that moment anyway, on a certain idea, on a certain goal, a certain objective, a certain theme or issue. And although you touched on this in our conversations, I wonder if you could plunge right in and try to describe that in connection with your own work. You mentioned [just] now some of the goals, or some of the responses that you're hoping to elicit from the viewer. I hate to say this, but I have to: What is it fundamentally about? Or is it just one thing? What's your main objective?

FLETCHER BENTON: Why I'm doing sculpture?

PAUL KARLSTROM: In the work itself. What's the theme, if you were pinned down?

FLETCHER BENTON: There is no theme.

PAUL KARLSTROM: "The theme of my work is."

FLETCHER BENTON: There is no theme except I suppose that I. . . . No, there is, there's really no theme that I'm consciously aware of. That each piece has to find itself. You know, I start—I have elements I'm putting together, I'm trying to get the family together, you know. Sometimes I can't do it. Now you're asking me, "Well, what do you mean by getting the family together? What do you mean by creating something that the order is fixed, and if one thing is removed it no longer has the same order," and all these things? I don't quite know how to answer that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That is the question, of course.

FLETCHER BENTON: Yeah. I don't quite know. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Why do you want to. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: Why do I want to continue to do what I do?

PAUL KARLSTROM: To do that?

FLETCHER BENTON: Because I get a certain visual pleasure out of getting these things put together in such a way that I feel they're right and can't be changed. I get them to a point where they can't go any farther and can't be any less. It's a sense of—God, this is a word that is really so outdated—but I'm trying to find, I'm trying to find the best composition of a certain amount of given geometrical forms. Now maybe that's not enough for one to spend a lifetime trying, but it interests me very much. And I think the better I do it, the more you as the viewer will unconsciously have a response to it. You won't even know what that is, maybe. It's almost a secret

thing, saying, “Well, gee, you know, I don’t like that piece.” “Why not?” “Well, I don’t know why not. I just don’t like it. There’s something that bothers me about it.” Or you might say, “I feel very good about the piece. I like that piece.” “Why?” “Well, I don’t know. I just like it.” To me that’s enough. I mean, if you. . . . Well, I’m gonna say this, and it sounds boastful, but it is not. And I think it’s telling me something; I hope it’s positive. But I again and again and again have people who come here to my studio who are interested in getting a piece of mine, and when they get here they can’t make up their mind.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Hmm.

FLETCHER BENTON: Now I hope that’s good. It might be bad. You know, I mean, it could be bad. After they’ve left, in some cases, they haven’t taken anything, because it was very confusing for them, and that they couldn’t just light on one piece. Other times they have taken more than one piece because they couldn’t make up their mind. They’d get two or three pieces and they would take them, instead of just one. And time and time again people would say, “God, I have a feeling about a lot of your pieces. I just don’t know what to do about it.” And they expect me to tell them. I can’t tell them. But I can say to myself, “That’s what I wanted.” You know, I wanted the work to be each piece as, taken as far as I can take it. So that it’s, it stands by itself, without too much question. I’ve had other people say, “Well, you know, you should throw in something there to, you know, some burr in the bushes.” Something that’s a little out of whack just to. . . . Instead of having everything just where it should be, maybe there should be something that isn’t where it should be.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What you’ve described, at least as I hear it at this point, is really a fundamental respect for composition and, if I dare use the word, design. We talked about design earlier. We talked about the emphasis of Italian design on much of art of the sixties.

FLETCHER BENTON: That is a word I don’t use. But if you want you may use it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, let me use it.

FLETCHER BENTON: Okay.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And then you can counter with whatever word is better, because that’s what we want to find out. But up to a point what you’re describing as a goal, or what you’re after in your work, is to achieve that balance, that composition, of elements—you’re working with geometric elements. These then become elements in a design, in a composition, and that what you want of them, what you require of yourself, and of the finished piece, is that they come into harmony, they come into balance so that if you, as you say, remove one element, it would be wrong. That, to me, sounds like a goal of really superb design. How would you. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: Well, you know, I don’t consider design a fine-art form. So I don’t use design. I use composition. . . . That’s it.
[Interruption in taping]

FLETCHER BENTON: Well, I have to keep going back to things we talked about yesterday, and that is music. I feel that I am dealing with givens. I’m dealing with visual notes. And I try to put those visual notes together so that they represent chords, they represent timing, they represent crescendo, they represent very, very abstract things about music, about the musical note. I mean, people try to describe the musical note. You know, a high might represent, might be like a bird. Or a bass horn might be like a villain. Or whatever, you know, Peter and the Wolf thing, in school and how they tried to explain all that stuff. I think there are birds and villains in my work as well, but hopefully they’re in some sort of concert, some visual concert. As far as my work having a message, or some deep meaning, no. It doesn’t have it as far as I know. And it’s, I’m not driven by some deep concern here in the. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, let’s try another tack on this.

FLETCHER BENTON: Okay, good. Because [I’m having] trouble.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And I certainly don’t mean to be, use the term design in any kind of a negative or perjorative way. It’s simply useful to suggest an impulse, which has to do with organizing elements in a way that if that is the main goal—the organization of these elements—one thinks, at least, of the term design. But let’s set that aside for a moment. Presumably, in making art, the artist has a notion of art that separates it from, as you were saying, from design, that there is a difference between fine art and design. If many of the goals seem similar, in a superficial way, then the question arises, what finally separates it, other than the fact that the artist is, calls himself, herself an artist, and says this is art. This of course is a pressing question of our times. There is something that allows you or assures you—in fact I imagine you would be rather strong about this—[that the] things you make, are indeed art.

FLETCHER BENTON: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Why is that so?

FLETCHER BENTON: Because I've put together the pieces the way that I wanted them put together.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Um hmm.

FLETCHER BENTON: You know, the old joke: It takes two people to paint a painting. One to paint it and another one to come along and hit him on the head when it's done. And I try to be those, both those people in these pieces. It gets to the point where I'm hitting myself on the head and I say, "That's it. You know, you've gone as far as you can go." You can't take it any farther. And. . . . Well, this is really a. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: This is a big question. I realize that. [chuckles]

FLETCHER BENTON: All of a sudden I think about the [Robert] Bechtle article I read that you wrote.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Um hmm.

FLETCHER BENTON: And then I jumped over to Richard McLean, the photo-realist, and a few of those guys. What's the difference between what they do and the photograph of which it is of? I mean, is that art, or is that illustration? Some say it's a good question. It's illustration. All right, okay. Let me take this tack. I'm going to say something that I really believe. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay, go ahead.

FLETCHER BENTON: . . . I mean, you really got me in corner here, and I'm thinking about it, and I'm drawing from the benefits of teaching, which is you stand up year after year and you talk to [the] students and all of a sudden you surprise yourself with something you've said, you know, they've brought it to the surface, and it all of a sudden has meaning to everybody. I think those artists who are nonobjective artists, those artists who work without relationship to object, have a greater task than those artists who are working with recognizable shapes, forms, objects, emotions, intuitions, suspicions, and all that other stuff. Because the nonobjective artist has no place to launch what he's doing from. A person who is working with the figure or landscape or still life or whatever has a common place to launch it from, something that is recognizable—for everybody. Then how he deals with that becomes his personal interpretation of it, leaving the viewer standing there more or less able to give to the painting whatever it is they want to get from it, in some case, you know. It's not that they're gonna stand there, look at this thing, and get the same emotional feeling that the painter had when he distressed something that was recognizable. You know, I'm thinking of say Manuel Neri. He takes the form, he distresses it, he paints it, he interprets it in his way. If you took ten people who didn't know Manuel Neri and walked them by that scupture and asked for ten responses you'd get ten different answers. And if Manuel was there you'd get an eleventh. So it becomes very subjective when you are the viewer interpreting a painting or a sculpture. Well, it is, even if it's nonobjective, but what I trying to say is that the nonobjective artist has to establish certain rhythms and certain abstract common denominators with the viewer that the guy who's doing the, the gal who's painting in a realistic way does not have to deal with. Do you see what I'm trying to say?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah, I do.

FLETCHER BENTON: So that in my case I'm not establishing a distressed figure as Manuel is. I'm not starting with it. I'm starting with nothing. Except geometry. Now I've got to get that stuff together in such a way that there's a response . . . that there's a response. And the better I can organize these shapes, hopefully the stronger the response. And the response may be nothing more than, as I said before, "You know, I like the way that looks." I keep thinking of Ben Nicholson. I really like his work. I like his great color sense. There really isn't a hell of a lot there, if you start taking his work apart. Yet when he gets it together, with these very soft grays with a little bit of white, and another muted color here or there, and the cut shapes or the delicate lines, the puzzle lines that go through the piece, all of a sudden it has meaning to me.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay, meaning. Meaning. You just said the key word. The goal is to somehow communicate or to point to, flush out, some meaning. And. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: But you're asking me, "What is the meaning" and I don't, I can't tell you.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, but we should try. I mean, I suppose that's good enough for a starter, or maybe for an ender; I don't know. But that, I think you've now suggested or hit upon something that in your mind would separate design—craft if you will—from art, what makes it art. And in this case, it is to try to communicate or invoke some meaning. [Let's, Just] think of [a, the] world view. I mean, why is that an interesting activity? Why does that matter?

FLETCHER BENTON: Well, I think if you can reach a great sociological grouping, with nonobjective statements,

you're going to reach a more common and honest feeling in all of those people than if you try to reach them through recognizable realistic statements, because each social group has a different [feeling] about women [than this], different feeling about religion, a different feeling about this and that. I suppose you're. . . . Still lifes are common with all societies; they can appreciate a nice still life. I think the geometry of every, of every society, which comes forth in their coinage, comes forth in their architectrue, comes forth in their fabrics—the most primitive [basic?] part of that society. I'm thinking of the Middle East, and. . . . [Topography, Typography], it always shows up there. You try to touch a universal thing. It goes back to music. I don't care how far out the social group is or whether they're playing on a reed or beating on an oilcan or whatever, when the rhythm is right, everybody can respond to it. It's really the most common, basic. It doesn't have to be Bach. It can be the primitive in the woods pounding on a log.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, you've just introduced another word, which I think is very important, and that is the concept of the universal.

FLETCHER BENTON: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Now I don't want to say. . . . You're going to need to say this or agree or disagree, but it's based on this conversation. It seems to me that your artistic goal is to try to apprehend or try to approach this notion of the universal, this thing that ties us all together, this shared experience. And that is a very noble and very traditional artistic goal. That defines the artistic aspiration or mission, whereas no designer I think is going to claim that he or she pursues the work with the goal being to provide a bridge or a contact, some touch, with a universal. Am I overdoing it, overplaying it?

FLETCHER BENTON: No, I think design many times has to do with function.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Or advertising or. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: Or whatever, but it has a function. Whereas nonobjective art is different from design in that it has no function except to be what it is. Period. It has no reason for being other than what it is. That is not true of design ever. Ever.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Of course that's an art for art's sake notion. That the object has an identity of its own, is responsible only to itself. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: Sculpture especially. [chuckles]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah. Interestingly enough, as you probably know, ideas about that are changing. The notion of art for art's sake is not exactly in the highest credit right now. Many observers, people that care about this kind of thing, require, demand of art, as a matter of fact, that it connects to us as human beings. We don't. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: Well, who says this? The National Endownment of the Arts?

PAUL KARLSTROM: No, no, no, no. A lot of art historians and a lot of critics and a lot of artists.

FLETCHER BENTON: Well, what. . . . Well, tell me about it, because I'm so isolated here, I don't know what you're talking about.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, I'm just suggesting this, to see what your response is to that notion. The idea of art for art's sake, of course, goes back to the late nineteenth century, [and maintains] basically that the object can, has worth and validity and importance separated from any other considerations, even separated from people, if you will. It has no responsibility except to itself. And we heard that in the sixties, if you'll recall. Talk about a sixties phenomenon, that it was self-referential, the work of art. And that is absolutely fine, like it or else. I would suggest that the times have changed. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: Ah, I get it now.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . and that we are requiring more of art and artists, and I don't think that the two are incompatible. I think it's just a matter of how you describe it all. But the notion—and I don't want to beat this one to death, but I think we're on to something—the notion of something beyond even what you described as the initial goal in your work, which is to work with these geometric shapes, to bring into harmony, bring them into balance. Hopefully that will evoke a certain kind of response, or a response. That that is simply a step. In other words, the finished piece is a step to something more, a goal that goes beyond that, and you keep coming back to a notion of some universal, so I have to believe this means something. This universal has interest and importance because it applies to human beings and to mankind. And so the art finally could be viewed as not in the service of itself—art for art's sake—but in the service of the needs of civilization, of what makes us a civilized society, that it is something that contributes to our lives, and to our culture. Does that sound way too fancy?

FLETCHER BENTON: No.

PAUL KARLSTROM: [Okay.]

FLETCHER BENTON: I am dealing really with the eye.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Not the soul?

FLETCHER BENTON: Well. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Not [the mind]. . . ?

Tape 4, side B]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Fletcher, when we ran out of tape on the other side, you said that you were dealing with the eye, and then I asked you not the soul, not the mind, and you. . . . That was a question, and you were beginning to respond. Could you pick it up there?

FLETCHER BENTON: I am dealing with the eye. And, you know, you're getting into me deeper than anybody has, Paul, and you're forcing me to really think this out a little bit more. In order to do what I do I don't need to have answers to the questions you're asking. But, yes, it is the mind and it is the soul. But it's, it's an uncluttered mind that I'm trying to reach. And in a way it's an untarnished soul. It's. . . . I find children respond very directly to my work. They respond to the color, they respond to the shape, they respond to the interest of, "Oh, does that really move, that circle hanging there on that thing?" Maybe, maybe, maybe what I'm trying to reach in everybody is the innocence, a sense, a sense of an uncluttered statement, a sense that you can look at what I do and not have to be sophisticated. You don't have to have, you know, great knowledge of art history and you don't have to be able to tie me to somebody, or say where I'm going, and, I don't know, all that stuff. But I do think that the mind and the soul are involved.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Are you appealing then to, oh, a certain important part of what human beings are and that has to do with the, with a certain simplicity, a less complicated past. We at least like to think of childhood as a less complex, less complicated, less troubled time, and you mentioned that you're interested in the. . . . Or you didn't say that; you said the children respond, I think, in a very special way to your work and that is the kind of thing that you're looking for, and presumably then you'd like to touch that same childlike part of adults. Is that right?

FLETCHER BENTON: Well, it's not something I'd really put into words till you pushed me to get it into words. I think that's true. A couple of things happened to me that as I look back were meaningful. There was a time I wanted to learn to draw well. I wanted to be a good drawer because there was a comparison. If you drew well, people could come and say, "Gee, that looks just like that." And immediately there's a recognition as you having achieved something better than somebody else because it looks more like it. There was that time in my childhood. There was also a rainy day. There are going to be many of them, I suppose, but I remember one rainy day, I wanted so much to go outside with the rest of the kids, and I had a cold or something and my mother wouldn't let me go out. She had a new box of crayons, and she got me some paper, and said, "Take these beautiful colors and make something." And I don't know, that was a big moment. And color has probably been my, one of the biggest challenges of my life, and I didn't find out until I was trying to get in the submarine corps of the Navy that I was colorblind. I'm about 30 percent red-green colorblind.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Are you really?

FLETCHER BENTON: Yes, which doesn't really make much difference. I see the same greens and reds you see, it's just that in low light level, or when you get into very pale shades of grays that have a little green or a little . . . a little red or a little green in them, I can't distinguish the difference. And in dark colors, I can't tell dark green from dark red, if the light level's low. So, anyway. The other thing that I remember that I hope we can talk about more later, because I'm very close to it now, is the old man who bought used farm machinery, cleaned it up, and painted it bright colors for the farmers. And I'll tell you more about that later. But he used the primary colors. He had green. He had green. Grass green. He had lipstick red. He had daisy yellow. He had sky blue. He had black. He would take that machinery, those farm-machinery tools, there'd be rakes that were pulled behind tractors, he would take what is known as a disk machine that has disks, that disks the earth, and he would paint those disks different colors. The cradle which holds the disks would be a different color. The tongue was a different color. And there was this harmony of these basic, rich child-like colors. I mean, they weren't, you know, the sophisticated secondaries and emotional whatever the hells. These were just good old red, good old blue, good old black, good old orange, good old yellow, whatever. And there was something very honest and direct about that. But it stimulated the hell out of me. I mean, I would get a reaction when I rounded the corner. . . . It was in an alley, the small town. We had the typical block, square block, and then alleys that crossed in the center. So that in this square block, you had this X, and in the center of this, these two alleys where they intersected the

center of the block, behind all these junky old stores and stuff, was this used farm equipment place. And in order to get to my father's office, I would have to walk through this alley from school. And I had to make a turn in the middle of the block, and wham! I'd make that turn, and there was this vacant lot full of pure color. Just always surprised me, no matter what. And I walked by there so many hundreds of times, I can't tell you. But if I was thinking about something, or eating an ice cream cone, or whatever, preoccupied, there was always the shock of that area of pure color. And what you're looking at here, in these steel watercolors when I paint them, it is directly back to that farm-machinery thing. And I can honestly say that. It doesn't come from anywhere else. You can't hook that up to anything. But that's where it's hooked up. Now, in a way, that is decorating, [okay]. But that's what this guy did. He got. . . . I mean, it didn't make the machinery run any better that it was painted these multiple colors. But it attracted the basic people that bought it, the farmers who were very unsophisticated in this town. The town was four thousand, five hundred people. It was made up of farmers and coal miners—and a few business people, businessmen, you know. Had the store, the drugstore, and whatever. And these farmers would come in and buy this used farm equipment. And they bought it from this guy. Because he painted 'em bright colors. This stimulated 'em, it excited 'em, and they bought it! I mean, this guy did a hell of a business. So there is something very basic about color. Any artist will tell you. Color is very basic. And most art dealers will tell sculptors who don't paint their pieces, "Well, give us some color! You know, we need some color. People like color." Well, that's not why I paint my pieces, because there are many that aren't painted. But I still get the thrill out of. . . . That piece over there originally was not painted. I had it lacquered a dark [steel].

PAUL KARLSTROM: Why don't you say what you're pointing to so that _____ _____.

FLETCHER BENTON: It's a steel watercolor that is a circle with a jagged. . . . Well, it could be a rake, couldn't it? A farm machinery rake. With little cylinders stacked on it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What year is that?

FLETCHER BENTON: This is recent, very recent. It's three months old.

PAUL KARLSTROM: '89!

FLETCHER BENTON: '89, right! [chuckles]

PAUL KARLSTROM: All right.

FLETCHER BENTON: So. . . . The piece was not designed to be painted. I came to work one day, I was feeling rotten. In the studio I was just rotten, I was feeling cranky, and, you know, all the crummy stuff. And I, on the second floor where I have my small pieces, there's a paint table where I've got all of this guy's colors. Red, green, blue, orange, turquoise, black, white, you know. Basic stuff. And I thought, "God damn it. I'm gonna, I'm gonna get into some color today. I'm gonna paint my thing like the farm machinery. And I proceeded to go ahead and do it. And it's happy. It made me feel good that day. I'm sitting here talking to you, and I'm very happy to be looking at this piece. I feel. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Me, too.

FLETCHER BENTON: . . . very happy to see this piece.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Me, too.

FLETCHER BENTON: I have that same nice, good, clean, innocent feeling I had when I walked through the alley in Jackson, Ohio, and I saw this guy's farm machinery. Now, for me, the artist, that's enough for me.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That is, indeed.

FLETCHER BENTON: That is enough for me. And. . . . What we're trying to do is to get into it deeper, to find something deeper there, and I'm sure there is. And I appreciate you pushing me to that, because if you feel good and you feel happy about that, and those colors have a relationship that just make you feel okay, then I'm getting to you somewhere. I could ask you the question: Where am I touching you? Where does this piece get to you, from your eye, to your brain, to your soul? I mean. . . . [gets up and moves away from microphone]

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you're going to bring it over here, to look at it more closely?

FLETCHER BENTON: Well, I want to get it because the glare is bad here.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Um hmm.

FLETCHER BENTON: The colors are a little happier with not so much glare.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You're absolutely right. There's something about these—and I think they're wonderful pieces. That's an unsolicited expression of admiration—and also joy and pleasure. There's a playfulness about much of your work, and certainly about these. . . . What do we call them? Steel. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: Steel Watercolors.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Steel Watercolors. The reason is that they presumably are the materialization in three dimensions of the wonderful series of watercolors that you've done.

FLETCHER BENTON: Um hmm.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And we'll talk later in more detail about that process. But I think. . . . I think it's interesting what you describe in terms of your own response—and motivation—response to these pieces and motivation in painting them, of taking these colors from the old farm-equipment painter.

FLETCHER BENTON: It's like safety blue, danger red. . . . [chuckles]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right, right. [chuckles] And the using. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: . . . coverall black.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . of them this way, the response that that gives you, well, I think it's very effective. I would say that I feel the same way about them. They do, they make you feel good. They. . . . I think what you're describing really is the bigger issue that we've been trying to get at, that which distinguishes art and the aspirations of an artist, a good artist, from simply painting up the farm equipment so it'll be more attractive and attract the attention of the purchasers, partly because it makes them feel better. But the goal there, of course, is to move the product.

FLETCHER BENTON: Um hmm.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's part of it. The primary goal. In your case, I suspect that the main goal was not to move a product, a piece of merchandise in this case, a sculpture. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: No.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . but rather to share with viewers, hopefully lots of them if possible, these similar feelings and even an assocation with your own past. I mean, you're drawing upon your past, your experience. It seems to me that this was a very important experience of yours. This is something you remember quite vividly.

FLETCHER BENTON: Very.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You described walking by every day. That had a meaning for you, and you suspect or you hope that it's possible through your work to communicate this positive feeling, this constructive feeling, this feeling of pleasure, with others.

FLETCHER BENTON: I have never told that story before. I mean, everybody [that's interviewed me] knows I was a sign painter. But I've never told the farm-machinery story. And it's interesting because. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: It's a great story.

FLETCHER BENTON: Well, there's really more to it than that, but that for starters is a good one.
There was one other thing that happened to me, and it was [at] Cole's Art store in Columbus, Ohio. The town that I grew up in was so small that each year when school started we would go to Columbus, Ohio, to buy the school clothes, because they had a couple company stores there, and that was about it. We went to Lazurus and to Columbus, Ohio. That was maybe 75 miles from where my town was. And to get there in those days, it was a two-and-a-half hour drive, and I would go with my mother and my brother and sister. We'd go to Lazurus, we'd get, she'd call up ahead so that it'd be, the same woman we bought things from, she would take us through the store, buy what we needed for the year. And then, in the afternoon, there were two things that, three things that I always wanted to do. One. . . . And I did it on each trip. One was I would go to the Planter Peanut man, who used to walk up and down the sidewalk giving peanut samples. He had the big hat on, and the suit.

PAUL KARLSTROM: [chuckles]

FLETCHER BENTON: And I'd buy a bag of peanuts, I'd go over the state capitol, and I'd sit on the bench and feed the squirrels. Then I would walk two blocks down North High Street. Now, Columbus, Ohio, is really a farm burg. It's a big place, it has Ohio State University, a great football team, and it's the capitol of the state, but it's essentially one, long road—must be 20 miles long—and everything grows off of that, like little suckers on the

trunk of a tree.

PAUL KARLSTROM: A strip city.

FLETCHER BENTON: It is a strip city. So I walked two blocks north to. . . . And I was walking along with these peanuts, okay, and I saw Cole's Art Store. And I went into this art store. It was on the second floor. The boards on the floor were worn from, God, decades of people coming in there and walking. And they creaked and they had, you know, like the old hardware stores, creaky floors. And I first discovered this place, I got upstairs, and it was one big, long room. With glass cases full of colors. Colored pencils, colored chalk, colored paint. They had, in those days, paint samples, a board with all of the colors that were actually painted on the board to show you how they would go from their intensity to their whited-out sense with white. It was like going inside of a rainbow. I. . . . God almighty, it just. . . . It just really hooked me forever on—on that world. It was, I just wanted to buy everything. And I bought a bunch of tempera paint, the jars that you remember probably having in the first or second grade, a big jar of blue, big jar of red, big jar of green, the big jar of orange, and so forth. Again [chuckles], the farmer-equipment colors that I'd had in first grade. Now I was nine or ten years old when this happened, so I was well out of the poster-paint, first grade stuff. But still, there were those basic colors that just, boy! So I've gone through enough stuff, and I'm at a point in my life where I'm going back to—not intentionally, but I've sort of slipped back into all those kind of wonderful, innocent feelings about form and color. I didn't tell you about my whizzer motorbike, which I repainted several times, but it's not that important.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, your Steel Watercolors that—and I must say this—I don't ask them to be anything more than what they are, because what they are is plenty. In other words, I don't, I look at 'em and I don't try to figure out what the form represents. It simply doesn't matter. I mean, it's quite clear to me that it is what it is, and it works on me visually, and I would say, well, certainly aesthetically, I don't know, probably emotionally as well. I mean, it's entirely satisfactory and effective as it is without being a rake, without being any other known object that you might think of.

FLETCHER BENTON: Well, for me, as we sit here and talk and I look at this thing, it is a series of decisions that I made. And that's the fun of being an artist. To be able to make those decisions. I mean, I go home at night and I walk in the back door, if my wife tells me there's something wrong with the plumbing, or whatever, and what shall we do about it? That very question means that I have to make another decision. If I've been working here all day, I don't even want to deal with that. I've made all my decisions for the day, you know, I, I'm out of decisions. So in these pieces especially, it's decisions. You're looking at forty or so decisions. If I can make those decisions in such a way that I feel they're the best decisions I can make about this, then I have something that—it's not really sophisticated; there's an innocence about it. I mean, I could be using elements, and I could be dealing with sculpture in such a heavy way that it could create a great sort of mystery, and people could stand there and look at it and write into it whatever they needed to get out of it. I'm not that way. I am working toward, I suppose, if we had to say the truth, the child in every person. A certain innocence, and a certain classical sense of order. There's one other thing I wanted to say about this. [pauses, thinking] Well, I talked too much.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, earlier you said—I don't know is this is what you had in mind—but earlier you said you wanted to say something about I think limiting options. You were talking about selections and choices and decisions, and how you really want to try to limit them in some way. You were saying this in reference to painting.

FLETCHER BENTON: Oh, I know what it was. Thank you very much, because it is of interest. It is of interest to these, because in most of my work nowadays it's that I go way beyond where I should stop, and then the creative, really the strong, heavy creative thing for me is the subtraction process, the subtracting away, from going too far. But having been a painter—and I love painting. I love painting. I just wish I could do both. My emotional demands are more of a painter than a sculptor because I want instant gratification, which you can get as a painter. And it's very hard to get this in sculpture because things have to be fabricated, welded together, sanded, finished, painted, whatever you're going to do with it. It's a long damn process. Whereas as in painting, you know, you can have your work up, and you say, "Well, I don't like the red up in the upper right hand corner, you can knock it out with some blue, and change it, push it around, whatever. And as a painter I was a push, slash, drip, slop, tighten up kind of painter. So I was really in there moving it around, and there was always the hope, as a fisherman has, of catching the big one. And I can't be the only who's felt, who feels this, but you hope you'll have an accident, or you'll discover something by accident that will help lead the way and, you know. In a picture unless you're a photo-realist or somebody who's got everything pretty much predetermined, there are a lot of accidents that happen. But the way I work in sculpture, I don't have that chance. You know, it's not there, there's not the hope that [chuckling], "Well, you know, maybe I'm gonna discover something here that I didn't put into it, or by putting these things together they're going to do something, and they're gonna interact in such a way that I'm going to discover something." Not true. Not true. Sometimes in painting them, there is a nice relationship between one color and one shape to another color and another shape. So. . . . I said earlier that these pieces represent, you know, pretty much what they are. There's no accident here. There's no, nothing like

what happens in painting. And you can sense sometimes when you see a painting where the artist discovered something and had an accident and it paid off. You know, it's not just for the artist to see it. Sometimes it's obvious. I think Hans Hofmann had a hell of a lot of accidents.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Sometimes not good. [chuckles]

FLETCHER BENTON: Sometimes not good. [chuckles] And certainly the New York school, they were dealing a lot with accidents.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You know, Fletcher, what this suggests to me is that one of the things that you're seeking is a kind of control. Control, I don't know if I would extend it, I wouldn't presume to extend that to your environment. But a need to, for one reason or another, which we may probe later, a need to maintain a control over what you do.

FLETCHER BENTON: Yes. A lot of control.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Which is, fits in perfectly with your notion of classicism and your self-description, or the description of the work as leaning more towards the classical not the romantic, because the idea of the accident in our time, the Abstract Expressionist gesture and spirit, is letting go of that control.

FLETCHER BENTON: Hmm. Funny.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You know, they're just different ways of dealing with the world.

FLETCHER BENTON: Um hmm.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I think we'll pause now and pick up tomorrow?

FLETCHER BENTON: Oh, okay.

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PAUL KARLSTROM: Yesterday, when we wrapped up, we were getting into what I thought were some very interesting areas. One of them was, it seemed to me, some acknowledgement of the importance of your childhood experiences. You just mentioned that as time goes by you seem to feel that perhaps those early experiences, [and] I think you said, before you were fifteen, had as much of an impact on your work—or on you, anyway—as anything that happened subsequently, speaking in terms of influences. And I would like to pursue that theme a bit, to try to learn just why you feel that way, and then some specific incidents, or people. Obviously our childhood is important for the forming of our lives, but you, unless I misunderstood you, felt that your early life was perhaps the major influence on your work. So can you explain that to me?

FLETCHER BENTON: If you had asked me that question five years I wouldn't have had an answer, but especially in the Steel Watercolors and the fact that I'm using color again in—and some painted watercolors—but more so in the sculpture where I'm using a palette again with multiple colors, I am aware of the effect that this small town had on me. And it was, it was because most of my interest and my joy was dealing with paint, working with paint, the smell of it, the fact that I was down in that basement room that my parents gave me. Painting leather jackets with Vargas girls on them for the guys, my friends. That was sort of my social recognition of the time, copying them off the calendars. I was learning the alphabet out of a Speedball pen book, brush strokes, the. . . . And I was also trying to paint at the time. Probably from about ten to fifteen, I now am aware of how important those years were to me. Because I was constantly painting everything in sight. I had a Whizzer motorbike which [chuckles] was a funny thing that happened right after the war. They came out with a one-cylinder motor that would fit in the frame of a bicycle, had a belt drive back to the rear wheel, and was quite a device. Dangerous as hell, and I had several accidents, and it's a wonder I'm still alive, but it was a fun thing. I had a Whizzer motorbike, gasoline-powered thing, and I used to ride that around town. And I'd put it on an old bicycle, so being very conscious of the nicked-up old bicycle, I painted the bicycle. Striped it, did a lot of decorative stuff on it. In a way [chuckles], I mean, that was probably going on in California with hotrods, you know, at the beach, but I didn't know anything about it. I mean, the town I grew up in was forty-five hundred population of farmers and coal-miners. And I think I mentioned yesterday, the guy that was painting the used farm equipment, [that] was probably the closest thing I'd seen to color—other than the sign painter who was very influential to me, a little bit later on. His name was Bill Hankey and he was the laziest sonofagun. He was a typical sign painter. He probably was a sign painter because it was the laziest thing he could find to do, most laid-back thing.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Hmm.

FLETCHER BENTON: Bill Hankey, however, was an incredibly good sign painter. I mean, he was triple-A. He just

had the touch. Well, after the war in 1945, '46, I went to work with Bill Hankey as an apprentice sign painter. He taught me the trade. This was after those few years in the basement down there trying to decipher the Speedball pen book. I think it was Higgins' Speedball Pen Book. So there was this particular smell that sort of went along with oil paint. It was linseed/turpentine smell, and it was, you know, I can even smell it now, and get so wound up that I could fly. You know, it just sets me off, it gets me excited, it's, it's wonderful. And most of those colors, especially the paints that I had at the time were very primary colors—as were the sign colors. As was the used farm equipment guy. So this went on, and I went into the service when I was eighteen, came out when I was nineteen, went to college, started looking at museums, started being introduced to the art world. And I always felt—and it might have been because this old German paraplegic, who's still alive, Max Hendershot, who made us copy this awful calendar art of the forties. . . . One painting that you've all seen was the green bow with the red carnations. I mean, it's a classic piece of cornball calendar art. I think, God, I painted that thing half a dozen times, but. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: When was this? When were you studying with Max?

FLETCHER BENTON: Mr. Hendershot?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

FLETCHER BENTON: Old Max. I was eleven or twelve years old when I first went up there on Saturday mornings to be with him. But it was exciting. It was the only instruction I had. He was the only one around there that had an easel in the whole county, I think. [chuckles] And my mother had made arrangements with some character in Columbus, Ohio, for me to study with in the summertime. We went up to visit him and he was a roaring, roaring gay. I mean, my mother, five minutes with him, said, "I'm sorry, but we have to go." We turned around and left. I mean, it was, this was really, really something, and of course he was eyeing me. I was a nice, young, little guy here, and. . . "

PAUL KARLSTROM: So your mother really. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . encouraged you, in this way, and then, and tried to arrange for some kind of training, some kind of guidance.

FLETCHER BENTON: She did. But either through Max Hendershot or through just my own awareness, I felt the sign painting and the fine arts should not interact. And it was something I felt very strongly, and it was something that I was aware of very early on.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Now how did you figure that out? Because that's not. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: I don't know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's not the kind of thing that. . . . Unless you're in a situation where you've had access to museum collections and there's a lot of cultural information around, it's not necessarily the kind of distinction that one would make. You know, art is art, and very often art is [simply] if you can render well, make something look like something.

FLETCHER BENTON: Well, I haven't been asked that question before, but my first answer to that is that I pride myself in having a very good eye and I pride myself in having a tasteful sense. And I mean I was aware of that very early on. And to me there were sign painters painting paintings, painting pictures, doing paintings that were was so awful. You know, it was sort of the stipple [method]: You put the sky in first, and then you stipple the trees on top and you've got the lake with the diminishing road and the. . . And I mean I was just damned aware that that was not legitimate. There was something just really awful about it. And I was also aware later on, you know, in my twenties, that there were fine artists that I'd met or heard about who were doing signs. And they were terrible sign painters. You know, I mean, they thought because they could, you know, get paint under their fingernails then they were, they could paint a representational picture of red poppies in a green bowl that they could also paint signs. Not so. A sign painter's mentality is totally different than the mentality that one has, I think, as an artist. Now that throws me into a odd set of circumstances, doesn't it?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Um hmm.

FLETCHER BENTON: Because I was a good sign painter. I was self-taught. I learned almost everything about sign painting, with the exception of billboard pictorial art, interestingly enough. I never attempted too much of that. I felt very weak in that area. And I felt intimidated. And I just would do anything I could to avoid it. Because the scale was so large, the. . . . It was just overwhelming. So, I mean, I did a little bit of it, I reproduced. . . . I remember [Wheat-a-men] beer logo, which had an eagle on it and a bunch of other stuff, but for all practical

purposes I stayed away from it. But when it got into truck lettering, show-card work (which I didn't do much of), but glass gold, the shiny bank gold on. . . I did a lot of gold-leaf work. In fact I did a lot of Spencerian gold leaf, which is probably the most difficult form of gold leaf. And I really didn't like gold leaf work so much. It paid well. I mean you could make a lot of money fast. But it was a tedious, tedious endeavor. And I am not a tedious person. I mean I like results right now. If I could take a shortcut to get somewhere I'll do it. So I. . . . I got off the track there, didn't I?

PAUL KARLSTROM: No.

FLETCHER BENTON: But anyway, I kept the sign painting separate. It wasn't till I was thirty-two or -three, when the Gump's show came down, that I said, "Wait a minute! Maybe there's something in all of this that I can use." It was like that door was never opened in my studio, mind, when I was doing my art. Never! There was none of my sign-painting equipment visible. [It was] all put away.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Where was this happening now?

FLETCHER BENTON: Well, I've covered about ten, fifteen years just in this last. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right, okay, _____ _____. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: I mean, I jumped from my childhood at fourteen, fifteen to thirty-two in the, out Elizabeth Street in the grocery store.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

FLETCHER BENTON: I only did that because I carried this concern that they must not overlap for all those years. I mean, it was a very serious thing with me. I continued to paint signs. I painted 'em into college, I painted 'em here in San Francisco. And it was my pocketbook. It was the way I could feed myself. So I couldn't ignore that. And it was interesting that I didn't want to get into big billboard pictorial stuff—which I could have done very well.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, why didn't you?

FLETCHER BENTON: Well, that may have been because that was close to the fine arts aspect, and I didn't want to deal with that. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Why, 'cause of the scale, or what?

FLETCHER BENTON: Because you were trying to reproduce something.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Um hmm.

FLETCHER BENTON: I mean, if you, for instance, if you're in the real estate business, you might come to me and say, "I've got this billboard out on Ninth Street I want you to, you know, do my portrait over here in a big oval. . . ."

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

FLETCHER BENTON: ". . . and next to it I want a building that I've got for sale." Well, that gets into something beyond the alphabet, and beyond layout, and I didn't want to do that. Which is another thing, too. All the years as a sign painter, layout, proportion is very important, because you've got a given space which you have to go in and break up the space and. . . . And you always work from the center out. You know, center to the left, center to the right, for your spacing. And today everything's spaced computer-wise, but in my day, the great sign painters were the guys who could take the word lawyer and get the "L" spaced properly to the "A" and the "A" to the "W" and the "W" to the "Y" and the "Y" to the "E" and the "E" to the "R." I mean, that was the word that they asked you to letter-space when you were getting your journeyman's card 'cause it's a tough word, lawyer. But I was always very sensitive to the negative space between the letters, and I was always very sensitive to how you lay out a window or a sign or a truck door, whatever, because that got into composition, that got into making a statement that was fixed. And that statement, you know, had to have impact, it had to have certain rhythms and certain color combinations. It wasn't like going to your grocery store where you've got your grocery-store lettering of green, red, and blue on white paper. All right. So it was interesting, as I continued to paint more as an adult, I found that when I dealt with the canvas, I was dealing with it compositionally from some secret place that had crossed over into the sign world. I mean, I was dealing with the space in a very deliberate concerned way. Before I made my first stroke on the canvas, I was concerned about where the weight of the canvas was going to fall, of [how] my composition was going to fall on the canvas. And if you look at some of my early paintings, which I don't have many around here, you'll find that there's a lot of negative space—and maybe falling to the lower left bottom, or what have you.

[Interruption in taping]

FLETCHER BENTON: I guess what I'm trying to get to is that there was that time after the Gump's show, after the nude circus performers were taken down because they were considered obscene and not in the best taste of the Gump's tradition, that I stopped painting entirely. I was thirty-two or -three at the time. It was only some months after that, that I said, "Wait a minute. All those years of working with the alphabet, there is something there that I want to use." Also it was a little more accepted by me then, at that time, because there were New York guys that had been sign painters, and I figured, well, you know, there are a few sign painters out there that were using some of their techniques and some of their learnings from sign painting. And I said, "Okay, I'm gonna take the geometry, the alphabet, and I'm gonna deal with the alphabet, or I'm gonna deal with the negative part of the letters, and what-have-you." And I started doing the kinetic things, which ultimately directed us to where we are now.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Umm.

FLETCHER BENTON: And I'm certainly getting to this in a long way, aren't I. The question was about the colored pieces and why is that close to my childhood? It is close to my childhood because I'm more relaxed now about my, about what I want to say. I'm not hung up with "Is this sign painting, or is this fine art?" I'm not hung up with some need maybe that I had early on to make some heavy statement. I mean, a lot of that stuff. It's just like you've been sunburned and you've peeled it off, and there's. . . . You know, I feel very. . . . I feel very innocent now. And I had, you know, sort of covered that up. So the influences that I'm dealing with, especially in the Steel Watercolors, Steel Drawings, and many of the things that happened after my Folded Circle, Folded Square, Alphabet series relate directly to that wonderful innocence and excitement I had before I left town to go into the Navy. I mean, there was no big deal about it. I decorated my bicycle, or I painted it up. I'm painting up my sculpture now. And they could be bicycles, I suppose. Really. And there's no big deal. And I was involved for many years making a big deal about it. And I'm glad that it's not a big deal anymore. Because now I can, I feel just totally free to, to wander on the rest of my life doin' whatever I feel like. With no reason for it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That to me sounds very Californian, as a matter of fact, and I was going to ask you at some point if you've felt any connection with some of the activity—and I guess we can look again at the sixties—this polychrome movement, I guess it's called. Or somebody like Tom Albright would call it that, where artists, painters cum sculptors or assemblagists, began then to paint in very bright colors their constructions and their sculpture. I think of somebody like Robert Hudson.

FLETCHER BENTON: But it's interesting, most of those people—in fact, I can't think of anybody that it is not true of. . . . If they painted their sculpture, it wasn't a flat paint, I mean, a flat color. There was modulation, there was chiarascuro, there was one color painted on top of the other, there was. . . . It was more of an easel painter's dealing with it. What I'm doing is not an easel painter's way of painting; it is a sign painter's way of painting. [chuckles] You know, you don't mix a little bit of color right on the surface and. . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you would, in a sense, disassociate yourself from that particular development in Bay Area art—or anywhere else for that matter. You really do believe that your discoveries or the directions—in respect to color, now we're talking about, that your work took—were independent to a large extent, but certainly more, derived more from early life experience.

FLETCHER BENTON: Absolutely. No question.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Your own life [rather] than any other concurrent development.

FLETCHER BENTON: All those years that I painted signs when I was very young really had a greater influence on me than I was aware of until the last few years or so. And all of a sudden I realized just what an impact it had had. I've just buried it. I've kept it separated. I opened the door a little bit, but I didn't let it all out. I'm gonna let it all out now, you know, see what happens.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you feel then that in your work you're at a stage now where you can expose, if you want, what you are all about? That that's what the work becomes. Not all about, but that that is more important to you than trying to deal with issues, styles that are in the air being developed by other people.

FLETCHER BENTON: Well, definitely I don't deal with issues. I've never dealt with issues. I think the closest issue I ever dealt with was when I got to California and I was sort of associated with the figurative landscape school. But I was never dealing with issues there. It's just [that] I was put there because I sort of looked that way. No, I don't know what issues I've dealt with. But let me say this, that I don't know where I'm going now. I just want to keep working, and I want to keep enjoying the experience of each piece, if it's painted or not painted. I want to get a little bit of that innocence back into it. And that's kind of what I'm interested in right now. . . . Because you can remember the innocence you had as a teenager. I mean, everything was new and fresh, and of the first time.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Let me try to clarify certain issues or points of view that I believe have developed about you and your work. Which is a slight digression, but not really. It's something that I would like to dispatch at this point, and then set aside. The art critics and art historians of course feel obliged to make these connections that we've been talking about. They can't help it; it's the way they operate. And sometimes it is inappropriate. I think maybe in your case this would be so. But again looking at Tom Albright's survey of art in the Bay area, and it is something that has to be dealt with because it exists as perhaps the major survey study for this area and it does include you. Albright said that in the sixties sculpture in the Bay Area took on more of a technogical finish, a high finish, a concern with surface, very much like in formalist paintings. This was according to Tom Albright. And that this happened especially around San Jose State. Of course you. . . . I can't remember what year you started teaching there, but you are associated. . . .
FLETCHER BENTON: Sixty-seven.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay, and so I think then what he. . . . The implication is. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: And he's absolutely right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, the implication, certainly for a reader of Tom Albright's text, is that you and your work and your influence as a teacher played a role in this development deriving from certain, the look of formalist painting, maybe its concerns, then carrying that over to the three dimensions. Is there some truth to that?

FLETCHER BENTON: There might be. There might be. And just let me have a moment to think about this. I never thought of myself as a high-tech person. Just because the metal I used was stainless steel, and just because certain parts of that metal was polished to a high finish, and just because I used timing motors—which by the way, the particular timing motors I use are the same motors that were being used in the 1920s for clocks. I mean there was nothing high-tech about it at all. But there were people who were working with the same thing. They were working with high-speed DC motors with sophisticated timers, and they were getting into a lot of real delicate wiring and a bunch of other stuff, that were high-tech. Even [Robert] Rauschenberg's bubbling thing in that show that Maurice Tuchman put on was very high tech, and you wouldn't consider Rauschenberg a high-tech artist.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

FLETCHER BENTON: But it took high tech to make that mud bubble. And I was sort of thrown into a general category there. But Tom is not all wrong at all. I was very interested in surface, as I'm interested in surface now. [chuckles] It's just that, paint rather than. . . . But mine was not a high-tech contribution. The reason is I never had the knowledge of it. My motor-driven pieces were so basic and so elementary and so pathetically amateurish if you ever look at one. But where I think San Jose got this recognition was a lot through Fred Spratt, who was not a particularly high-tech person either, but he was always—and still is—on the weather front of whatever's going on in the art world. I mean, he's always. . . . If computers are hot, he's the first one to get out there and push computers.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What was his name, Fred Spratt?

FLETCHER BENTON: Fred Spratt. He was the head of the department for years down there. He's finally retired. But kinetic art was hot, so he went after the kinetic people, and I was the closest one, and that is why I was asked to teach there. It wasn't for any other reason than that the kinetic thing had hit. And San Jose has always tried to be [at the forefront], even though it's a farm-town school; and it was, whether you know it or not, the first state school in the state-school system. Was a teacher's college. But Fred's very aware of things, and thank God for him because he kept that school right up front. And at one time it had over fourteen hundred students. When I was there a teaching staff of over eighty. That's just teachers. It was probably the largest art school west of the Mississippi River. Now there were other people there that were much more involved in the high-tech thing. They weren't big names, but they were people who were really into it. And many of the students, like Mike Cooper, Bob Strini, just to name a couple of them. Sal Pecoraro was into that kind of. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: These were students of yours? Some of them?

FLETCHER BENTON: Couple of 'em were, like. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: What about [David] Bottini?

FLETCHER BENTON: But they didn't learn anything from me. Actually I learned a hell of a lot from them, 'cause these were real. . . . David Bottini was a student of mine. But these guys, that swift bunch in the seventies. They were right out, they were California, they were right out of "sweat and shine," you know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So it was a more general, something in the air they were responding to, rather in your opinion than a direct influence from you.

FLETCHER BENTON: Not me. No. Yes, you're right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay.

FLETCHER BENTON: No, they weren't particularly responding to me. I was more symbolic than anything else. For instance, I didn't know how to use a lathe, which is absolutely imperative in that high-tech kind of thing. I don't know how to use a milling machine. My only knowledge—and it was so basic it was pathetic—was with a band saw and a table saw. And I mean, I stumbled through that. So it was a myth. But Tom's right in pointing his finger there, because they were two really hot schools then: San Jose and Davis.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Um hmm.

FLETCHER BENTON: Those were the two California schools.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And quite different, in the kinds of artists and art that was coming out of them.

FLETCHER BENTON: Absolutely. If you wanted to be a painter and, you know, do the more ragged things, you went to Davis. And [Robert] Arnesson was there, and [Wayne] Thiebaud was there, and. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: [William] Wiley at one time.

FLETCHER BENTON: Wiley and Roy DeForest. If you wanted to do more highly finished, highly resolved works, you went to San Jose.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Where did that leave the Art Institute then? Somewhere in between?

FLETCHER BENTON: The Art Institute. . . . [Hah]. Well, you know, the Art Institute is really a necessity. It's a very expensive necessity. I think the Art Institute really develops the image of what an artist should be. I'm not so sure you can learn a hell of a lot there. But that's all changing. You know, I'm talking about when I taught there. It was. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

FLETCHER BENTON: I was really a, you know, I was really riding in the front of the bus before desegregation over there.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What do you mean?

FLETCHER BENTON: [chuckles] Well, I mean, I should have been in the back of the bus. I was the wrong color for the Art Institute.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh. [laughs] You mean. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: I mean, I was. . . . They didn't even have a band saw or a table saw when I went over there. I bought this cheap little band saw and this cheap little table saw. . . .

[Tape 5, side B]

PAUL KARLSTROM: You were saying?

FLETCHER BENTON: Well, the band saw and the table saw lasted one semester, and then they were totally done in. The fine arts students needed stretcher bars made, and that's what they used to make them, and. . . . It just wasn't a place to do anything. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: How long were you there?

FLETCHER BENTON: I was there '67, '68. Two years.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And you. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: Kathan Brown was teaching printmaking right up in the same, up in the tower, and I was teaching some sort of—I don't know what they called it—beginning sculpture or design or something. I left there to go on to my stuff and Kathan Brown opened Crown Point Press.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You just felt like a, well, a fish out of water there, I gather. It just didn't match at all what you were about, or. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: I couldn't get anyone in my classes because [chuckling] there was no one over there that

was really, would be caught dead sanding a piece of wood.

PAUL KARLSTROM: [chuckling?] Let's. . . . We're gonna be talking more about kinetic sculpture, about developments in your career, but I don't want to let go of. . . .
[Interruption in taping]

PAUL KARLSTROM: I don't want to let go of the earlier period and some of the points we were discussing, before we've really gotten what we need from a discussion of your childhood and certain biographical life-experience issues. I suspect that things that happened in your life are definitely reflected in your work, and so it's essential for us to try to pinpoint some of those things, try to get at the essential Fletcher Benton. This isn't all that easy to do, and we certainly don't want to duplicate, you know, bringing together a long chronology because that's being done for your monograph right now, and it's something that can be built upon. So for the purposes of this taping, this oral history, what we want to try to do is ferret out those things that might not appear on a chronology, a published chronology. Those things that maybe give a little more insight, the whys, the wherefores. One of the things, as we were wrapping up yesterday, that really struck me was this. It seemed as we talked that your concerns, what you were trying to achieve in your work, at least in part has to with a desire to control your environment. To control. Which I suspect in a way goes counter to aspects of your personality. That's really not for me to say. But I sense there may be a bit of, a tension or a dichotomy between the order that—not just in your work, Fletcher, but in your environment, this studio, this. . . . I wish that [the] listeners could see it because it's absolutely gorgeous. Carefully, carefully thought out, organized, composed living space. I suspect that one of the reasons it was important to you—and I believe this was the case—of the long difficult process of bringing it to reality, is that it was a way, once and for all, to articulate your working and to a certain extent living environment. This of course is a kind of control. On the other hand, there's usually a reason why we feel this need. I'm making the question too long. Forgive me. But I'm trying to. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: No, I'm enjoying the question. [both chuckle]

PAUL KARLSTROM: I'm trying to get this, and I wonder if we couldn't for the moment just assume there's some truth to this observation.

FLETCHER BENTON: I think it's very true so far, what you're saying.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Maybe we could go back—better that you say it—but maybe we go back to any point in your background, in your experience that might give some insight into that.

FLETCHER BENTON: Well, I think you're dead right that I do want to control. Why that is, maybe if I start talking I can find because no one's asked me that question before.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Unbelievable. [chuckles]

FLETCHER BENTON: Well, yeah. I mean, my wife certainly says I try to control things. In the case of my studio, it's orderly for I think a general reason that I might be able to state, and then we could work backwards from that. Maybe it had to do with my mother telling me, "Go clean your room." I don't know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: [No.]

FLETCHER BENTON: No, it goes beyond that. Somewhere. . . . Oh boy, this is really something to say but it's the truth. I mean, there's no reason not to be truthful. Somewhere I either developed the. . . . I developed this or. . . . And I'm sure it comes from guilt, that it's very hard for me to be free to do my work, my art projects—and they are art projects, my art things—until I've got all of the other bullshit taken care of. You know, like is the grass mowed, has the car been washed, is the. . . . Well, those are poor examples, because I never wash my car and I don't have any grass, but—at least that needs cutting. [laughter] Oh, God.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Careful, don't reveal anything.

FLETCHER BENTON: Right. But there is a sort of a preparation that I go through. Oh my God! All sorts of stuff's coming into my head, Paul. There is a preparation that happens. I have to, you know, I come to the studio in the morning. I spend anywhere from 30 minutes to possibly all day in the damned office or wherever else dealing with the stuff I hate the most. I mean, the stuff I hate the most. Why can't I be the kind of person that takes the things he despises the most and puts them aside, ignores them, or says, "Oh, after I do the fun stuff, then I'll go do the bad, ornery stuff." With me, I've gotta take care of all of the mess, all of the blocks of lead we've towed around in our life, that we have to deal with. Like the government, like this, like that, like paying bills, like all that dumb stuff. And then when all that's done, what energy's left will go [into my] work. Now that makes no sense at all, but that in fact is the way I am. I don't know why I'm that way. And if I've got, if I've got clutter. . . . Now it's interesting, because I work in clutter. I mean, I don't mind clutter where I'm working. In a way when I'm painting these pieces over [here], I'm like Giacometti, you know, he always worked in a tiny little corner, and

then he started making some money and they bought him this nice, big studio, and he ended up working in the. . . . They went over, and he was over in the corner working again.

PAUL KARLSTROM: [chuckles]

FLETCHER BENTON: I mean, that's very common among artists, and I'm the same way. I've got a huge studio on the second floor, and I've got a big glass palette down there, and I invariably end up working in about one square foot on that palette because everything else is eating up the space. So it's not that this is a condition that carries through all aspects of my life. I do need to, I do need order. Now why is that? Why is it that I need order around me, but I don't need order to work. That's an interesting question. That's a very interesting question.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Is it possible. . . . Well, it's pointless for me to speculate, obviously, but just to try to raise certain questions, or direct thinking a bit. Is there any aspect of your own background that you felt at the time was out of control or chaotic.

FLETCHER BENTON: Oh, yes. [laughs ruefully] Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

FLETCHER BENTON: Like. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, what about your early years, and your home situation?

FLETCHER BENTON: Well, I mean, it happened to me in high school, and, you know, it's not something I really want to talk too much about. Got way out of control, and we both got in very serious trouble.
[Interruption in taping]

FLETCHER BENTON: Out of all of that, I was no longer a relaxed, naive child. But in a way it. . . . I required of myself more and more that I control things. Well, there you are; there's the control thing coming back. Because that incident was totally out of control, and I never wanted to find myself in that situation again. And maybe control, maybe that control business some way or another is woven in with this business of order. I suppose it is, isn't it? I mean, the more orderly something is, maybe the more easily it is to control. I don't know. But I don't think you're referring to control as a negative thing. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: No.

FLETCHER BENTON: . . . and I'm not referring to control as a negative thing either. It's. . . . I need a certain amount of order—and I've said this to Paul a couple of times, and the people who worked here with me all hear it constantly—and that is that to find something, you have to refer backwards to something—and usually this involves paper of some degree or another—it's my Achilles' heel. I am absolutely brought to my knees if someone says to me, "Could you find something, 1983 and. . . ." I think, "Oh, God, '83, '83, where's '83? 83's gone." You know, it's out of my life. So I'm devastated by the need to keep track of stuff. I mean, to me, if I live a day—and this is probably more reflective of my personality than some of the things we've said over the last two or three days—to me I am livng right now, and really my whole self is right now. Yesterday is gone. It was spent. It's like eating a pizza which you had last night. You know, you ate the pizza. The residue, it comes out in due time. And then you start the process all over again. And I am very much that way in my work. That's why, for instance, my work may go out of here with an acid, dark brown patina, come back after a show, and go out again painted multiple colors, because I'm no longer the [same—Ed.]. . . . [chuckles] I mean, if it comes back, and it's sort of a brownish, all-one-color patina, and I don't feel like that the day it comes back, and I may just repaint it. I've done that many, many times. Because I'm not the same person I was when that piece went out. It comes back, I feel differently, and since I'm the artist, and since I have control, I'll change it, [the] color of it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Since you have control, that's right.

FLETCHER BENTON: Yeah. I mean, I am responsible totally to myself and myself alone when it comes to my art. There's no wife, there are no children, there's no lease on the building, there's no checking account, there's no nothing. I am the whole show. And that is to me the greatest reward of being an artist. We said this is one of the earlier tapes. You know, what other artist has this opportunity? There's only one, and it's the poet. Certainly the actor, the performer, don't even come close. The architect, he's as far as I'm concerned, with the exception of Frank [Gehrey] and a few other guys, they're nothing but subservient to the proportions of the industry: four by eight.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And the clients.

FLETCHER BENTON: And the clients and the control, the pedestrian mediocraty of government controls, from the

city level to the county to the state to the federal. So, I mean, to become an architect, it's just making a whore out of yourself. Very few of them rise above it. Very few. Less than one percent. So I mean, who else? The artist still has that opportunity. We are the only. . . . Listen to me; I'm getting all wound up here. But we are the only dedicated group that has no federal benefits. None. Except social security, if we pay into it. There's no way to even control that, really. So we stand out there alone. We have no residuals of any sort due us. The poets at least get a residual of something, if the book sells.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, well, none of them sell any poetry.

FLETCHER BENTON: I know, but the point is it's on the record.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

FLETCHER BENTON: The artist gets nothing. And, since this is going on tape, one of my big heats—and at least I can get it on here, and it'll go away in the safe—is that California made this effort to give the artist a five-percent resale commission or residual or whatever, and the people that supported those who didn't want that to happen, were shocking to me to find out who they were. Hunk Anderson, Nathan Oliveira, Henry Hopkins. Obviously John Berggruen and most of the dealers. Those are just to state a few that were on an executive committee of a group called CADRE [_____—Ed.]. I can't remember what that stood for, but CADRE was this group of. . . . John Merriman was another one, the legal professor at Stanford. Al Elsen was another one. And here was this [tight] little group of upper echelon people who through, I think, donations—a lot of it was Hunk Anderson's money—went to the State of California and lobbied and lobbied and lobbied to beat this law down. To keep the artist from getting a lousy five percent—a lousy five percent!—of the increased value of a work of art during the time that it was purchased and resold again. That. . . . Now wait a minute; don't say anything, 'cause I'm not finished. That is less than sales tax. It's less than half of what you tip a waiter. It's chickenfeed. Yet these people felt that their egos were such that they felt and argued publicly that without their support of the artist and buying the work that the work would not have increased in value. That is so much horse hockey [sic], I can't tell you. You're a historian. Name me one artist that did a great masterpiece in his early years, and never painted again. Name one. There are none. The reason early work is valid and becomes a masterpiece is because the artist continues to pay his dues, he continues to work, and there are, there is a continuing ruler or tape measure to measure early work from. These guys have failed to consider that. . . . I mean, the classic example is the Rauschenberg incident with the Scull's Angeles cab guy. When the Rauschenberg painting went for $80,000 at auction, [and] Scull had paid two or three thousand for it, or something like that. In that auction, Rauschenberg stood up and said, "You know, I should get a couple years' free cab rides," is what he said, I think. It may not be exact quote. And Scully stood up and made some wisecrack about tough shit, you know. "If I hadn't bought your painting, you wouldn't, it wouldn't be selling for $80,000." That is simply not true. If Rauschenberg hadn't continued to paint, the damn thing wouldn't have been worth more than two or three thousand dollars. So anyway, how'd I get off on that subject?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, you were talking about the special role of the, sort of. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: Oh, yeah. I got off on that subject because as an artist we have total control.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

FLETCHER BENTON: Nobody's pushing us around. So it's very nice. And I love it. So I take a brown piece and I paint it multiple colors. But that's off the subject too. Boy, do I get wound up.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, what we were. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: Bring me back, Paul. [chuckles]

PAUL KARLSTROM: What we were talking about. . . . All of this is interesting; it's all part of the picture. What we were talking about. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: Control. We were talking about control.

PAUL KARLSTROM: We were trying to get at, articulate your. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: And order.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . I think quite apparent, self-acknowledged need for control and order.

FLETCHER BENTON: Oh, I. . . . Let me interrupt because I know where I was.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Sure.

FLETCHER BENTON: Just let me finish this.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay.

FLETCHER BENTON: I was talking about using up a day.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's right.

FLETCHER BENTON: And that's important to me. Because when I use the day up, it's gone. Each day, for me, is the hope of the next day. It's not what happened yesterday. And I really live a hundred percent in that frame of mind. It makes it very difficult for the people around me to deal with me, because if I have to deal with yesterdays or -years, boy, it's terrible. But. . . . I mean, right now, sitting talking to you, I'm thinking about what I'm going to be doing tomorrow. When we have a break, I think, "Jesus, tomorrow I've got this to do, I'm working on that, I've got a new can of yellow paint," you know pretty basic stuff. But it's the important things. And the more cluttered my life is the less tomorrow becomes a fun day to have my own choices about. 'Cause if your life gets cluttered and gets out of order, they start dictating what you do the next day.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It's interesting though. I see a slight contradiction in what you say. You were saying that you live very much for now, for the moment, for today. Yesterday is over. But on the other hand, I get the very distinct impression that you also are preoccupied with the next day and with the future. And let me suggest this: Perhaps anticipating, trying to think what things have to be done to make sure things happen in a certain way—which is a kind of control, a trying to project into the future. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: It's a kind of order, too.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . you're grasp and management of events, and so that suggests that it really isn't that much living for now, for the moment, which would be then throwing yourself entirely into this.

FLETCHER BENTON: You're right. You're right, unfortunately. And that. . . . That is not. . . . I mean, I keep hoping by controlling the moment and keeping things in order, I will have that opportunity. I mean, I haven't lost hope. I get little bits of it each day. I get a little bit of fun, you know, a couple hours here and a couple hours there, but I keep hoping that [chuckles] the more I deal with what's coming at me—and that brings up the other thing: my emotional ability and my ability to deal with things are not that of a sculptor. I mean, I'm the first to admit that. I have the disposition of a painter. I need an immediate kind of thing to happen. Well, I'm quite sure if I could take care of one thing, it would be that I could have it done right away. I could have sculpture happen the way painting happens. It doesn't. It's impossible. Because in sculpture you lose the very key thing that is most important to an artist. We're talking about order, we're talking about. . . . What was the other thing?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Control?

FLETCHER BENTON: . . . control. But one thing we didn't discuss in this thing of where the artist is—and where I am—is privacy. I mean, a painter has this wonderful privacy every day to put in the studio and to drift with whatever they are that day, whatever they are when they wake up in the morning, whatever things influenced them or have come up in the day before that has their chemistry and their brain set up for the following day. They could go to the studio and quietly have these things, share with these things, share with the previous pressures or the desires of the next day. In sculpture, that very seldom happens. I mean, I. . . . We've been talking about how difficult it is to keep things in order, and why I live for the moment and look forward to tomorrow, and why I'm trying to hold all this together. It's to maybe get some privacy back. And, and dammit, you know, you came here for this interview this morning. I had to ship a piece out. There's a semi-truck sitting down there, that involved about six people to get the thing loaded, a fork lift, a bunch of paperwork, and all this other stuff, which if I was a painter that would never happen. I'd call up [Scott] Attow, and he'd come out here and I could be on the pot and it wouldn't make any difference. He'd get the painting and go on his way. And somebody at the other end would have a hammer and nail and they'd hang it. I've gotta send my guys to [Washington]. They've gotta be there when the truck arrives. There'll be a crane there. There'll be about six other people at the other end, including the architect, the engineer, the owner, the art agent that sold it, my worker, the truck driver, the crane operator. So I suppose the hardest thing I have had to deal with—and I've dealt with it in such small doses that I didn't really realize what I was doing—is all of this lack of privacy. And I can promise you, if I had known this in the very beginning, after I got through the first year or two of the kinetic involvement, I would never have gone in for it. Because I didn't want to lose my privacy. I didn't want to be, you know, a public servant. That is required, if you're doing sculpture, if you're doing big sculpture, if you're greedy as I am. I want to build it as big as I can get the money to build it. Then you shouldn't cry in your beer, Fletcher. You've gotta take all the other shit that goes along with it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Are you suggesting that you're not entirely sure it was worth it, then? That maybe what you, maybe what you had to give up was too big a loss, too important—in retrospect.

FLETCHER BENTON: No, I'm not exactly saying that. I'm saying that as I get older I'm getting freer from that feeling, but I have had that feeling. I didn't feel I was trapped by any means. I mean, I can stop any time I want to. I've had two main direction changes already in my life: from painting to kinetic art, from kinetic art to what I'm doing now. They were very risky times, really. I don't care about that. But I didn't realize what I was getting into. I thought if you want to make sculpture, you want a big steel piece, you get some steel, you get a welding machine, and a couple grinders, and you make it. Not true. Not true at all. You've gotta have a place to build it. You've gotta get it out the door. You've gotta get it on something to move it. I mean, it's unbelievable. And if you want the "shock of the new," a la Robert Hughes [referring to Hughes' book, Shock of the New—Ed.], read a government contract on an NEA grant for a sculpture. It's something like thirty pages! They've even got a minority section in there, where you have to hire so many minority people. I mean, come on. What the hell is going on? So, to answer your question, I simply didn't know what I was doing. And now that I've adjusted to it somewhat, I have good people that help me, I have a certain routine that I follow. So the routine itself, once it's put in motion, takes a lot of the strain away from me. I'm able to put that into process and things move along on a predictable path. But in the beginning, my God, if someone had said to me, "In order for you to do what we did this morning, you have to do this and that," I'd say, "Forget it. Forget it." Give me some cadmium red, you know.

[Tape 6, side A]

PAUL KARLSTROM: As I said, we've been grappling with certain issues that really move into the area of your own personality. And obviously what I'm trying to do is to see if there aren't some aspects of that which can explain, to a certain extent, your work. And we have been talking about a need for order and for control, trying to. . . . Well, I get the impression that you are disturbed or made uncomfortable by the idea of accident, of surprises. Whether there are certain events in your life—you've mentioned one—whether there are other events in your life that could explain this. That to get off balance, and you're not in control, possibly some bad things can happen. I'm just not sure about that, but it does seem to me that—you talked about it earlier, too—that the accidental, the surprise, in your art [is] not the kind of thing that really attracts you. And one would assume that from looking at your work. How do you feel about that? Do you feel uncomfortable about accident? The unknown? The unexpected?

FLETCHER BENTON: Well, I count on the surprise. Now is a surprise an accident? If I'm working along and. . . . I actually have dropped a piece, you know, where I'll have this tacked together, and I'll be holding up a circle or a cylinder or something, and it'll slip out of my hand and drop and fall into a very interesting place on the table. I respond to that. And I say, "Oop, well maybe that's it. Maybe I should consider that." So I'm very aware visually of what's going on in front of me. Because any one of my works is nothing more than a series of decisions.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, you said that.

FLETCHER BENTON: You can't always say that about painting because. . . .
[Interruption in taping]

FLETCHER BENTON: . . . because in painting, you know . . . it's not true of all painting, certainly, but the Abstract Expressionist school or the New York school, there were a lot of accidents that happened, a lot of. . . . I mean that was part of the excitement of it. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right, absolutely.

FLETCHER BENTON: . . . is to set yourself in motion, and see what happens. So you can't say, altogether, that a painting is a series of decisions. You could, I suppose, say a painting is a series of decisions because an accident happened and the artist had to make a decision whether to keep it or not—and in that case, yes. Whereas my work is definitely a chain of events, a chain of very definite decisions. One, I have to decide the shape that I'm going to use. Two, if I don't have that shape in my bone pile, I have to make it. And three, I have to find a place for it. Now I may make the shape before I find a place for it. Or I may have a place for it and then have to make the shape. Or find the shape. So there is no way that one of my pieces is not a series of very deliberate decisions.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But you're open to fortuitous accidents or surprise.

FLETCHER BENTON: Exactly. If a piece slips and falls, as I said, or if. . . . You know, I have a banana form, my banana form, which is an elongated D, and I'm playing around with. I'm holding it up, saying, "Well now, would that look good there, or should it be down here?" and then all of a sudden, I go from that top of the sculpture to the bottom, and say, "Wait a minute! I'll put it down here. That's fine." So in my case that's discovery. It's not an accident; it's a discovery. They're kind of different, you know. Can I say one other thing?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Sure.

FLETCHER BENTON: In the process of my work, now, the discovery takes place during the process of finding all

this stuff to put together.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay.

FLETCHER BENTON: It becomes an immediate thing. Prior to that, I was working out everything in Folded Circle and Folded Square in maquette form, and then it was made. Not true in these steel watercolors. It is. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's a big change.

FLETCHER BENTON: That's right. It is not a predetermined thing. If we were talking the Folded Square or Folded Circle works, there was no chance for accident there, really. I mean, sometimes there was a little discovery, but I was manipulating things that were limited, they were, there was no chance for the arbitrary to come into play. And you might say, "Well, that's a safe arena to work in," and it is. It's also very confining. And to get anything at all, you've got to go beyond the very confines of what it is. I didn't mean to interrupt you, but I just wanted to point that out that in the Steel Watercolors, Steel Drawings, and the truck and geo pieces, all of the work after Balanced/Unbalanced definitely happened at the bench from the bone pile.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What do you mean by the bone pile?

FLETCHER BENTON: The bone pile is a table I have of rejected things—miscellaneous tubing extractions, extrusions. Not extractions. [chuckles] I've extracted [fifth] dimensions from extrusions. Tubing, rods, square stock. Probably fifty percent of the bone pile are failures from previous starts.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What you just said actually ties in precisely with what I was going to ask. There is an artist, again, whom we both admire. I believe that you actually went to pay a visit. He lives in Southern California. His name is John McLaughlin. Who carried, I think, to the extreme, or really to the conclusion, the idea of removing all accidents from his imagery, removing anything that was unexpected. Everything in John's work—and incidentally I sat and interviewed him some years ago—everything is very, very simple, very elegant, very beautiful forms and relationships—geometry, if you will, that which interests you. Everything in his composition, it was his attempt, his desire, to make all the decisions previous to creating the object, the image.

FLETCHER BENTON: You mean to painting it, to executing it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's right.

FLETCHER BENTON: Um hmm.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yes, that's an important distinction you've made. He would work on small pieces of paper, as you may know, and cut out colored pieces of paper, and arrange them in small scale. The painting was simply a working out of what intellectually, conceptually, had already taken place.

FLETCHER BENTON: Um hmm.

PAUL KARLSTROM: We're not going to get into a discussion of John McLaughlin's work, but certainly that methodology is of interest. Of course I'm asking you about that in connection with your work. But secondly, beyond that, with John there was a desire, which is opposite of Abstract Expressionism—and consider that he was developing his mature work right in the heyday of Abstract Expressionism—but this opposite goal of his was to remove every evidence, indication of the artist's hand. And I won't go so far as to say personality or mind; that's not true. I don't think he could remove that, but of the hand. The presence of the artist. And this ties in with, for him, a notion, which is Oriental, of the void. [And that] gets into some philosophical things. I'm sorry, I'm making a very long question.

FLETCHER BENTON: No.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What I'm doing is trying to describe a situation, an artist whom I know you admire, and I would like to know what connections you may see, or may have seen, between yourself, your work, and John, his work. What led you to go see him.

FLETCHER BENTON: The. . . . And it was a big trip then. I had two little baby kids screaming in the car.

PAUL KARLSTROM: When was it? Excuse me.

FLETCHER BENTON: It was probably. . . . My son was. . . . It was probably '68, I would say.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you drove down to Dana Point.

FLETCHER BENTON: Yeah. I did. From San Francisco. What I feel about John McLaughlin's work I'm sure is what. .

. . Oops, I let the word out, didn't I. The reason I went to see him is I got such a good feeling about looking at his work. Nothing more than that. I mean, it just, I was, I was seduced by his work. I guess that's the art word they use, isn't it? Not about him. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

FLETCHER BENTON: It was right. I'd look at McLaughlin's work, and it. . . . Again, it goes back to some of the feelings I have about a good work of art has to be something that cannot have anything removed from it and still be the same thing. And that's not, I mean, there's a hell of a lot of art out there you can remove several things from, and it still is the same. In some cases better. Not true with McLaughlin. And I respect that, and I certainly respond to it, because it is the thing that I'm constantly confronted with. I mentioned yesterday that I will take a work of art way beyond the stopping point—and I do this deliberately, when I'm down on the bench, putting this, holding these things together and getting them stuck on there, I'll go. . . . In a way, I'll say, in my mind, "Okay, you're real close. It's just about there. In fact, maybe it is there. But I don't know for sure. I'm gonna go a little farther." Going beyond, for me, reinforces. . . . It's the other guy standing there that's gonna hit me over the head that I was telling you about, he's gonna say, "Wait a minute. You went too far. You went past the sign." So you go back to where the sign was, because that was the right road—or that's the end of the road, or whatever. So that to me the subtracting process of a piece is infinitely important. I mean, it is so very important. And I found that when I had failed to do that, the works—and I keep 'em around with me a long time. Most of the works are here for quite a while before they go away. Because if I tire of the work then I've missed something. So I keep 'em around. And I've found that the ones I tire of are the ones that I didn't take beyond, "Whoa." I didn't go beyond "whoa." So, and with McLaughlin when I viewed his work, I always felt, you know, "To get to whoa he had to go beyond, and he had to come back." You don't get to whoa—whoa meaning stop, of course—you don't get to whoa, you don't know it's whoa until you've gone beyond it. Do you know what I'm saying? Does that make any sense to you?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Sure, sure.

FLETCHER BENTON: In other words, how do you know when to stop if you don't go beyond the stopping point?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Maybe, maybe he could tell. I don't know.

FLETCHER BENTON: Well, it doesn't, it doesn't really matter, but when I look at these works, I always sense this guy got there in the final analysis by subtracting, by going back to whoa.

PAUL KARLSTROM: [I don't believe he went beyond.]

FLETCHER BENTON: It doesn't matter, does it? But the point is, he got to, I mean, he stopped right on the line.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Um hmm.

FLETCHER BENTON: He didn't go two inches over the line, or two inches before the line. He wasn't somewhere within the ballpark, or he [chuckles], you know, he didn't slide past first base and just nick it. You know, he's dead on it. Every one of his pieces felt that way to me. Some I liked more than others, but that doesn't mean that I didn't feel they were dead on.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you saw in his work something to which you were aspiring in your work.

FLETCHER BENTON: Not consciously. I didn't make that association. The truth is I didn't.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And at that time you didn't, _____.

FLETCHER BENTON: But I responded. I mean I was respectfully responsive.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But the way you describe his work now, and what you admired, is what earlier on the tape you were describing as a goal of your own. But whether you were aware of it or not at the time, it does seem that you see an affinity. Interestingly enough—and I may as well say this and give you the benefit of not qualifying or denying—but of all the artists we've talked about—many sculptors, many painters—it seems to me, I sense that you have more of a feeling of kinship with the painter John McLaughlin than with most of the sculptors, say working in the Bay Area, or anywhere else for that matter.

FLETCHER BENTON: Yes. I have more affinity with painters than sculptors, definitely.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Of course McLaughlin is a very special kind of painter.

FLETCHER BENTON: That's right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I mean, he is, was entirely counter to the main stream of that time.

FLETCHER BENTON: Yes, yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Doggedly so, as a matter of fact.

FLETCHER BENTON: I mean, there was [Josef] Albers, and McLaughlin. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, and. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: . . . [Ben] Nicholson. Do you know much about his work?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Not a lot. I know him, yeah.

FLETCHER BENTON: Boy, God, he was, he was a. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: You like him too.

FLETCHER BENTON: Oh boy. I dream about him. I mean. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Really?

FLETCHER BENTON: I don't, I probably shouldn't talk too much about his work because I haven't seen that much, but what I've seen stops me cold every time. Like McLaughlin. Stops me, you know. I go through a museum probably like a lot of people I know do. I don't know if you do or not, but I go through very quickly.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, exactly.

FLETCHER BENTON: I walk quite a nice pace. Maybe three miles an hour. Bobbie, my wife, toots along at one tenth of a mile an hour, reading every label. I go through a museum and an exhibition looking for a stopper. I'm looking for something to reach out and say, "Hey, man, slow down. Look, take a look here." It's gotta be a shirt grabber, you know. I know there's little things in each work, but. . . . You know what I'm talking about?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Um hmm. Sure.

FLETCHER BENTON: It's something that just stops you. . . Or you walk past it and you say, "Wait a minute. There's something." And then you go back, you look at it again. Maybe you start to leave, but then you check the label, and the date, the title, and all this other stuff. McLaughlin always did that to me. And so did Nicholson.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Where did you see McLaughlin's work. Do you remember? I mean, how did you become familiar with it?

FLETCHER BENTON: I saw it at the L.A. County, and I saw it at a gallery down there. Was it David Stuart?

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you didn't here, actually in San Francisco? You saw it. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: No. No, I saw it there.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay. Well, he showed with Felix [Landau].

FLETCHER BENTON: Yeah, Felix. That's right, that's where it was. Around the corner in La Cienega _____ _____ one area.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right, yeah. At Melrose and La Cienega.

FLETCHER BENTON: See, I was showing with Esther Robles [Gallery] right across the street.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, you showed with Esther!

FLETCHER BENTON: Yeah, everybody shows with Esther maybe, except McLaughlin.

PAUL KARLSTROM: We'll have to talk about that later.

FLETCHER BENTON: Oh, boy.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, tell me, tell me about your visit with McLaughlin. Did you call ahead, or write him a note, or. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: I did call ahead, and I was scared to death. I knew that he was a very private man.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's true.

FLETCHER BENTON: And I want to tell you about it because it was a nice. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: I want to hear about it.

FLETCHER BENTON: To get down there, I can't remember who was with me, but there was Bobbie. . . . And, you know, I made an error. I said two children. I think she was pregnant with Ashley, and Fletcher was two and a half years old.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So that would have been what year?

FLETCHER BENTON: That would have been '64, '65, '66, '67.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay.

FLETCHER BENTON: Early '67. I think she was pregnant with Ashley. And we had another couple with us, and I, son of a gun, I can't remember who it was. Doesn't even really matter.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It wasn't the DeLaps, was it?

FLETCHER BENTON: Tony DeLap, no.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Because you know he also is a great admirer. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: No, I didn't know that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah!

FLETCHER BENTON: No, I don't remember who it was. But we had an old Nash Rambler called the Blue Mas [Maserati—Ed.], and we were in the Blue Mas, and I had hauled down a whole bunch of my kinetic art to Esther Roble's for a show on top of the Blue Mas. Knowing I was gonna do that, I called McLaughlin. He said he'd see me. We drove down there, pulled up in front of the house, and his house was one of the classic California row houses. Vintage 1958, maybe. Or, I don't know, '50, or something, but. . . . Very small, funny little porch, stoop. Two, three steps. Inside I remember the knotty pine. The living room was done in bamboo—I think it was bamboo furniture. I know the fabric was, it looked like lanai furniture. It was green with. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Floral?

FLETCHER BENTON: . . . floral, with a green background. Wife was sort of a Florida type, retired type.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Florida. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: Red cheeks, and maybe tight curly blue hair.

PAUL KARLSTROM: [chuckles]

FLETCHER BENTON: And John was quiet. Unassuming! Lord, he was unassuming. And I didn't know what to do. I didn't want to bring in Fletcher, who was a very hyper child. I didn't want him crying and running through the house, and I think I said to Bobbie, "Wait in the car," or something like that. It also gave me excuse to come look, say hello, satisfy myself and leave, and not get, put him in a position where he had to entertain us all afternoon. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

FLETCHER BENTON: . . . which I did not want to do. So then, I remember the living room, and some way or another we got around to the studio, and he said, "The studio's upstairs in one of the bedrooms." So we went up this very tight little spec[ulation—Ed.] house stairs. You know, it was about the size of a normal forty shirt.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Kind of [small].

FLETCHER BENTON: And walked up the stairs, got to the top and went to the bedroom, which had, I think it was in the front of the, facing out the front of the house, if I remember correctly. His studio faced the street. And it had the, it was right underneath the eaves. So you had this slanted ceiling coming down. The side walls were about five and a half, six feet, high. And then it hit the roof, and then the roof went up, and in the center of the room maybe you had ten, eleven feet. Or less. It must have been less, because it was a small room.

PAUL KARLSTROM: [chuckles]

FLETCHER BENTON: Easels sitting there. I didn't see the cut paper on the table. He maybe did that in the kitchen, I don't know. But this was strictly a place where he sat down and rendered. . . . He rendered his thoughts. He didn't paint them; he rendered them, you know. He dealt with the edge. He spent hours making the edge, making the edge, the edge—you know what I mean—the edge. And there he was. I can't remember if I read this, or he said to me—I may have asked him; I probably did—he said that he was a mathematician, or he taught math or something. Maybe you can, you interviewed him, you know more than I do. He was a math teacher. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: And a language teacher, and. . . . I forget some of the details.

FLETCHER BENTON: Was he at MIT or did he go to MIT, or how did MIT get involved?

PAUL KARLSTROM: I forget. Well, he was in Boston. He. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: [He] had something to do with MIT.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

FLETCHER BENTON: He either went to school or he taught there or something.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Um hmm.

FLETCHER BENTON: And. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: I think he was an engineer, but. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I forget. I've even written about him, and that shows how great my memory is. [chuckles]

FLETCHER BENTON: Well, he's the sort of person where it doesn't matter. I mean, you're in his presence and he's sitting there, quiet, attentive, polite—insignificant, really. Yet there's no denying [chuckles] that he's the guy that went upstairs there and dealt with those edges.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So he took you up there and then showed you his. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: . . . studio, which was a converted bedroom.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did he seem, did he seem interested in you at all and in your work, or. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: I don't think so.

PAUL KARLSTROM: He was just being hospitable and gracious 'cause you. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: Yeah. But, oh, the furniture! I went out to the car, and I said, "My God!" I don't think Bobbie did, went up there. I think I just went up with him. And I wish to hell I knew who else was with us, but I don't think they went either. John and I went upstairs. And it was not that big a bedroom. It was not ten or eleven feet to the peak; it was much smaller. With a tiny little bedroom. Probably was the master bedroom, but very tiny. For a queen size, max. Not king. Came back to the car, and I said, "Bobbie, God, you know, I've met this great man and I saw some of his pieces." I said, "You wouldn't believe that this guy that can paint those edges and deal with that incredible state of mind can live in that house." I mean, this house had. . . . It was so common, and the taste of it all was so sickening. With this bamboo, bent bamboo lanai furniture with the green fabric and the palm leaves or whatever the hell they were. Awful, awful, awful.

PAUL KARLSTROM: He's also a golfer, by the way.

FLETCHER BENTON: He was a golfer?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh yeah. He was a big golfer.

FLETCHER BENTON: But here this man would go upstairs. . . . And the knotty pine walls. And his studio—if I am not mistaken, and I'd bet on it—had knotty pine walls! And the boards going up the, underneath of the roof, knotty pine. Varnished knotty pine.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What did that suggest to you?

FLETCHER BENTON: Well, it suggested that obviously his studio didn't make any difference. He could be painting under a tree. [laughs] Or, you know, in a woodshed or something.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That it was an internal, entirely internal art, right?

FLETCHER BENTON: But you would think that a man who was dealing with such sensitive proportions, such sensitive proportions, and such delicate relationships of dark and light—I'm not even gonna use the word color—would need to have a white surrounding. I mean, he could have painted the knotty pine white.

PAUL KARLSTROM: White. Right.

FLETCHER BENTON: But this guy was beyond all that. He was somewhere else.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I would suggest, or it occurs to me, that here is a big divergence between Fletcher Benton and John McLaughlin. I would like to suggest this for you to think about—and maybe we can talk about it a little bit later—that this surprised you, seeing this man whom you had met through the work, and then [chuckles] you meet him in person in his lair, in his habitat, which in no way matched. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: Nothing!

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . in no way matched the man or the art. I would think that you could never say that of Fletcher Benton. I think the reason that. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: He's probably more secure than I am. I'm very insecure. I need the white walls. [laughing]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, you said it.

FLETCHER BENTON: That's a good point.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You said it; I didn't.

FLETCHER BENTON: That's a good point. And his hair was cut and it was very nicely combed back, no sideburns. [chuckling] You know, I mean, he looked like a high school teacher, you're right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's interesting. Well, I'm certainly a great admirer of John McLaughlin, but he's not the subject of this interview, but if you. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: No, but I think he relates.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, I think so very, very definitely so. And without overemphasizing this point, your reaction to his environment, his working situation, and your. . . . It sounds to me as if you were just bewildered by the fact that this guy, this unassuming guy, could go off into this fairly awful studio and so authoritatively, without any mistakes, really, express a vision, or a thought. And it seems to me that you have spent a good part of your career trying to create for yourself a world, and a working environment—not the least of which is this studio on Dore Street in the south of Market kind of industrial section—that would match what you're after in your work. Or what your work's about.

FLETCHER BENTON: Well, hopefully. . . . Hopefully it's not quite that way.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well. What do you think?

FLETCHER BENTON: Well, I think I was wherever I am now before the building.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Um hmm.

FLETCHER BENTON: The building was very important to me. I had outgrown my other building. There was no more room there. We were building sculpture on top of sculpture—literally. I can show you photographs [of this]. I had to get a bigger space. And what happened was I had the opportunity to control my own space. It didn't start out that way. I was going to put another floor in my old warehouse. So when I had this opportunity, I couldn't slough it off.

[Tape 6, side B]

PAUL KARLSTROM: You started to tell us a little bit about the circumstances leading to this studio, the place where you work and which also has, like a loft, studio and living space, which you use sometimes, but basically I gather you entertain here. What does all this mean to you? How did it come about and what does it represent to you?

FLETCHER BENTON: It came about because I ran out of space in the other building. I mean, it was just a very practical situation, and there was no way that I could enlarge my other building, third floor, put a third floor on it

without tremendous financial commitment and problems with the city. My wife and I had wanted to move and live in the studio, and we thought we could put a third floor on my other warehouse and do that, but it just didn't work out. And I was driving to work one day and I found these four lots here in the alley of Dore Street.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Is that how you pronounce it: Dore-ay? [rhymes with foray—Ed.]

FLETCHER BENTON: Dore-ay, yeah. I think so.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay.

FLETCHER BENTON: And I called on it. They told me the price. I almost fell over, but in a matter of a day or two I adjusted to, you know, just how much things had changed down here. Because I was one of the first artists south of Market Street, contemporary artists.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Hmm.

FLETCHER BENTON: I came down here in '63 with Onno DeReuder, a Dutchman who opened up the San Francisco Art Foundry. We moved into the building together years ago. So I've been around this area for all that time. I bought the lot, and, I don't know, a year and a half later built this building. And I was going to put in just a rectangular warehouse, and I got involved with an architect, which was probably a big mistake. Not probably. It was. And he tried to talk me into fancy windows and catwalks and glass walls and all that baloney, and I said, you know, "Look, all I want's a rectangular warehouse." But when I saw the model of the rectangular warehouse, there was this big flat roof, and I said, "My God, you know, we gotta do something with the roof, so let's put an apartment up there." That's how the apartment happened. 'Cause I thought, you know, if you've got the building and the roof you've already got the foundation so it's just a matter of a few walls and some sheetrock and, boom, apartment. Of course that philosophy can go on forever because there's always a roof on a roof on a roof on a roof. But we did stop at the third floor. So that's how the apartment happened. Bobbie and I were going to move in here and live within the space and all that stuff, and the building got very severe lawsuits. Contractor went bankrupt. It took us four years to finish it, instead of seven months.

PAUL KARLSTROM: [sotto voce:] God!

FLETCHER BENTON: It was the worst, one of the worst possible things that could happen to an artist. Well, all of a sudden, you know, you. . . . I was without a studio. The other building had been sold. I was out on the street. That's when I started doing the watercolors, because I had nothing else to do, except. . . . You know, you can do watercolors on a, in a chair!

PAUL KARLSTROM: Um hmm.

FLETCHER BENTON: And not knowing at that time that the watercolors were later on going to tell me where to go. And just let me say thank God, thank you, God, that this is another one of those wonderful things about being, being an artist: You never know where you're going. It's like finding some beautiful place from the air, flying over, and you look down and say, "My God, that's beautiful. Let's stop here." And you stop and you start walking through the forest and you discover all the things you didn't even think were there. And that's what happened with the watercolors. I came into the building. I was totally disrupted. Two years had passed, no work had been done, my continuity was broken, and I was trying to find a place to start, and I knew. . . . And I knew from past experiences that when an artist is in trouble—at least when this artist is in trouble—it's always best to get back here to the place where you were feeling the best about your work, repeat some of that, pick up from there, and hope that your direction and momentum will carry you someplace. And I did that, and the someplace was this body of work called Steel Watercolors.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And you're still doing the Steel Watercolors.

FLETCHER BENTON: Oh yeah, I. . . . Funny thing, after many—I've done many small watercolors—I'm just really getting cranked up. Because from the Steel Watercolors came all the Steel Drawings, came the Spring-Its, came Truck'N Geos, and all of a sudden I've gone from flat planes—Folded Circle, Folded Square—to the volumetric fat, sort of chubby pieces—Balanced/Unbalanced—to the very linear drawing, open, immediate Steel Watercolors, which led into Indians, Whole Pieces, Truck 'N Geo, and I don't know where it's gonna go from there. And the nice thing about it is I don't really leave a group of work unattended. I will go back and do a Balanced/Unbalanced piece because it keeps me . . . keeps me stimulated to do a Folded Circle and go back to the Steel Watercolor, because in my mind they're all together. And I feel that one in a way can refresh the other. So. . . . But my main concentration is Steel Watercolors now. We're finishing up some big pieces downstairs, and the little bit of extra money I make on that's gonna be spent immediately on the production of maybe five to six quite large Steel Watercolors.

PAUL KARLSTROM: The Steel Watercolors seem to be the result of a particularly fertile phase or circumstances

and series of events, including the studio—or the delay in the building of the studio—in your life, and you seem to be . . . very happy about them. You seem to be comfortable, pleased that these circumstances came together to allow you to do these pieces. In connection with them you've mentioned drawing and space, and it's true; they are very linear. And is that how you think of them? How do you think of them? How would you describe the Steel Watercolors, if you were forced to do so. What describes them? What, what are they for you?

FLETCHER BENTON: Those are tough questions. [chuckles] P.J., those are tough questions. [laughs]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, you know. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: I never think about what this is to me. I do it for pleasure. You know, I'm always seeking the next high, the next little bit of pleasure, the next. . . . Honestly, I'm not trying to sidestep your question, but there's no. . . . I mean I'm a builder. I was born a builder. There are builders and there are nonbuilders in this life. There are users and nonusers. God made me a builder, and I'm a builder, whether I'm building paintings. . . . Which is very interesting to use that word, because when I painted I built a painting. I didn't paint a painting. I didn't create a painting. I built a painting. And I think most paintings are built—which is a whole 'nother subject. [pauses] You hadn't thought of that one before, have you? But it's true. For instance, if you look at Motherwell, his large Spanish—what were they called? The Spanish Revolution _____. . . . [Elegies to the Spanish Republic]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Spanish Civil War.

FLETCHER BENTON: Civil War paintings. Those were paintings that were built.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Um hmm, um hmm. Constructed?

FLETCHER BENTON: No, built.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Built? How do you differentiate? _____ _____.

FLETCHER BENTON: Well, they were composed. . . . See, if you compose something you build it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Um hmm.

FLETCHER BENTON: I mean, composing is building. Putting together. Constructing. It's. . . . So. As opposed to the realist people, who don't build. They render, and alter, but they do not build.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, in the. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: But anyway, that's a whole 'nother. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: In the Steel Watercolors, you feel. . . . Actually I'm not looking for anything particularly profound about this. I was just thinking in a technical sense, or within the vocabulary of making art, the term you use is drawing.

FLETCHER BENTON: They're drawings; that's true.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Uh huh.

FLETCHER BENTON: I think of them as drawings so that they. . . . Sometimes drawings can be mindless. These are not mindless. What I'm trying to do is I'm trying to. . . . Gosh, I'm repeating myself, but I'm trying to get a good Caesar salad—which we had for lunch, didn't we? I did.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You did.

FLETCHER BENTON: _____, it was wonderful. Thank you very much.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You're welcome. [laughing]

FLETCHER BENTON: But, you know, it's, I'm working for a sense of order, harmony, pleasure. I'm a decadent [soul, sucker], you know, I. . . . [laughs] [Just] don't know what else to say. I want it to be. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: But your work doesn't look that way. You see this is. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: [laughs] I'm decadent.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You're decadent. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: Right, no.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . and the work does not look decadent, and so. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: Well, you know what I meant by that. If you work for pleasure and you work for, you know, all that stuff, it sounds decadent, doesn't it? No.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Perhaps, perhaps. Although I think. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: No, I wish I could say to you there was some great goal I was working for. I'm working for a very high order of things. The higher order. I suppose it's very zen, it's very this or that, but it's a higher order that cannot be really described. I know it. . . . It's like my son. You know, he used to tell me when he was in his teens—and even before that; I think it happened maybe when he was nine or ten, I think. "What's going on, Fletcher? What about this or that?" He said, "Dad, I'll let you know when it happens."

PAUL KARLSTROM: [chuckles]

FLETCHER BENTON: No, that's a great line. "I'll let you know when it happens." I said, "I don't want to know when it happens. I mean, give me a break. Let me know before it happens, you know. I don't want you callin' me up in the middle of the night, and say, `Well, Dad, it happened.' I mean, it's too late!"

PAUL KARLSTROM: [laughs]

FLETCHER BENTON: But in a way that I could say is true of my work. I'll let you know when it's finished, where I'm going.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What about, going back to when you started. . . . Or earlier on, not when you started necessarily. When you were, when you went into the university, and you went in '54, returned to the university, right?

FLETCHER BENTON: [nods affirmatively?]

PAUL KARLSTROM: And you were there till '58. Well, no that's. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: No, '56.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay, '56. You received your B.F.A. and all that, and this was before, immediately before coming out again to San Francisco.

FLETCHER BENTON: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You spent several years there.

FLETCHER BENTON: Hm. [almost a snort—Trans.]

PAUL KARLSTROM: What happened? What difference did it make? What about, did that make any difference in your career as an artist?

FLETCHER BENTON: Well, it's a great question. I went to college and finished college for my father, mother. I didn't need to be in college. It was, where I went to school was at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. It was called the little Harvard of the Midwest. It was full of sororities, fraternities, and football games, and a lot of beer, and the. . . . I mean, they had everything there but the bearskin coats and the. . . . What was that thing that Rudy Vallee talked through? The megaphone?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right, right, yeah.

FLETCHER BENTON: But I mean it sort of had that feeling, and it was, for somebody who'd been in the service, seen a little bit of the world, to go back to this sort of thing was . . . was odd! I mean, I can't say I overjoiced [sic] about the five or six years I spent there. But I didn't want to disappoint my parents. And getting that degree was important. And I got it. Took me five years of schooling and six years of the total thing, to get that four-year degree, and. . . . But when I was there I was constantly in trouble. The art department was pathetic. I mean, it was, it was. . . . The head of the department was a watercolorist that went to Vermont in the summer and painted trees, birch trees, and water ponds, ducks quacking over the pond, fluffy clouds. And his name was [_____—Ed.] Hodgin. He was an okay guy, but he was an uptight, stodgy dude. He was the head of the department and I was a very aggressive student. I was into painting. I was a good painter. I may have been the best painter there. I painted every single day, with maybe the exception of one or two days on the weekend. But during the week I was down there going at it. And they had quonset huts that were built for the Second World War ROTC, and those quonset huts were our studios. And at that time you couldn't work past six o'clock. Six o'clock they locked everything up and that was it. I used to break into the place. I had a window unlocked. And

I'd be in there painting till two, three, four in the morning, and the police would catch me in there, and they'd file a complaint against Hodgins and the art department. And I found out about five years ago from an ex-teacher, Richard Clark, that on two occasions at faculty meetings, executive faculty meetings, they tried to get me thrown out of school for going in there and working all night. I mean, I wasn't drinking beer, wasn't doing. . . . I was painting! And I must say that I was a bit of a problem with those guys because they weren't used to a student that was aggressive, that was trying to get something done. They were used to these, these other circumstances. And I remember, when I graduated I had a meeting with the dean and I complained about the school not having a graduate program. Raised a lot of hell about it. Two years later they had a graduate program. I don't know if I helped or not, but I certainly expressed myself that it was a pity that this was not the case. There were maybe one or two teachers there that had any idea at all about the guts of it all. And Richard Clark was maybe one. One definitely was Edwin [Fullweiter], and the closest he came to the real world was he did watercolors Four Times magazine. Remember Four Times magazine?

PAUL KARLSTROM: No.

FLETCHER BENTON: A little tiny thing that you found in the dentist's office that said Four Times on it. [chuckles]

PAUL KARLSTROM: I don't remember that.

FLETCHER BENTON: Oh, God. So it was a very isolated art department. When I came out of there I wasn't much farther along than after that, those four first prizes at the county fair when I was fourteen years old. Really. That's my school years.

PAUL KARLSTROM: From the standpoint of progress as an artist, then it didn't have much influence at all, but what about. . . . Presumably you went through a full course, majoring in art, right?

FLETCHER BENTON: [nods?—Ed.]

PAUL KARLSTROM: And do you feel that much from that, _____ _____?

FLETCHER BENTON: No. You see, I didn't need to be motivated and I didn't need the camaraderie. I'd already. . . . I mean, from very early years I'd been doing my little bit downstairs in the basement. I mean, I was already disciplined enough that I didn't need that support system.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you feel. . . . Well, you did this to an extent to please your parents.

FLETCHER BENTON: Yeah. And when I came out here, I got in graduate school at San Francisco State. Nepote, Alexander Nepote was out there at the time. And after two or three months as a graduate student, we were stretching canvases with rabbit-skin glue, and we were going through all this same. . . . [claps hands] And finally, I went to Nepote, and I said, "I'm finished here." And he said, "Well, why are you quitting?" Because I'd already shown locally. I'd had one-man shows. I mean, I was not. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

FLETCHER BENTON: You know. I said, "Well, I, God, you guys haven't anything to teach me." He said, "Well, you know, we'd like you to stay in this department." I said, "No. I quit." And that was it. Finished. No more education. It was a waste of time, because if you have ants in your pants, you don't need school. School gets in the way of a guy that's got ants in his pants.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I was going to ask you about that, because that is an interesting question that keeps arising. A lot of artists in the Bay Area make a living by teaching, but if you get them, usually off the record in conversation, in many cases they will raise that very issue: Is it necessary, is it useful, is it important for an artist to. . .

FLETCHER BENTON: No! [laughs] I don't think it makes an artist a better artist to teach school, no.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, no, what I mean is though, what about the students? What are they going to gain, what do they gain?

FLETCHER BENTON: Well, in California it's good because most of the schools up here have practicing artists working.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you think that contact is useful and beneficial.

FLETCHER BENTON: I think it's very good for the students, but it's very confining for the teachers because the institution, the [Dumke] institution that controls the state junior and university college system here, sees it as a teaching place. And in fine arts, you know, there's a certain amount of kickin' ass, you know. You've gotta. . . .

These students are there, and they're just sorta doin' their time to get the degree, and if you can get in there, and if you can really kick 'em in the butt, and say, "Look, you're not gonna see me for a month, but by God in a month you better show up with work 'cause I'm comin' after you. We're gonna have a critique and I'm gonna tear you apart." Well, that's very good for the student I think. It gives the student a chance to go off on their own, think about it, do some work, bring it in, and stand there and deal with what the teacher has to say. But that goes against the grain of the whole teaching system in California—or any state. They say you've gotta spend X number of contact hours a week with your students. So the danger is that. The professional artist. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Not to the student but to the artist/teacher.

FLETCHER BENTON: To both, I think.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh.

FLETCHER BENTON: I think to both. In the state school system, you've gotta, you get a lot of very immature art majors, [but]. . . . You know, for instance, the San Francisco Art Institute, that's what they do over there. They say, "Look, I'll see you in a month. Show me something." Well, that's not all bad. I think it's a lousy place to go for undergraduate school, but I think there comes a time when every art person who wants to stay in college has to be dealt with that way. And I got in a lot of trouble, and I was very close to being fired two or three times because I refused to be a part of the system. I was never student-evaluated, in all those years, nineteen years, I never was student-evaluated. I just told them I will not do it. I don't care what the students think of me. And if I did, I'd give 'em all A's and I'd be the greatest guy on campus. But I simply don't care. But the system is based on that sort of bullshit. Which might be good in English literature or science or something else, but in the arts it. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Does it belong in the university then?

FLETCHER BENTON: Maybe it doesn't. Maybe art doesn't belong in the university.

PAUL KARLSTROM: With due respect. . . . Obviously both of us sitting here think that it's an important area of human endeavor, but the situation you described. . . . In a sense one could say that it exists as a patronage system for artists; it provides an income. It's one of the ways many Bay Area artists have survived, have produced a regular income. One could question—especially in a place like the Art Institute—the value to student, is that the only way to get this experience, this contact? Maybe it holds them back. But one thing's for sure. They're paying very, very high fees. And is that the only way to do it? Is that the only way to have. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: I just read an interesting thing on David Park last night. He never even finished high school. Did you know that?

PAUL KARLSTROM: No, but I'm not surprised. I don't see that it's [necessary].

FLETCHER BENTON: He was really quite a guy. I didn't know that much about him. I never met him. He was still around, I just never met him.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Um hmm. Did you hear about him?

FLETCHER BENTON: Yeah. But I didn't know who he was, and I knew a couple of his pictures. That was about it. He was damn, a damn good painter. Boy, that guy was okay.
[Interruption in taping]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Why don't you tell me about the magic man?

FLETCHER BENTON: Well, you know, I'm enjoying this interview because I'm discovering, or I'm putting into words some discoveries about myself that there was no need for me to sit down and question. I mean, I do what I do, and it either makes it or fails. But, you know, in talking to you, you press me, and I don't have answers for some very simple questions you have. But I do. . . . Well, I suppose, that for me going to my studio and letting it happen is what it is all about. I usually get an idea or a. . . . Not an idea, no, that's not, that's not the right word. I get a. . . I get a notion. That's a good word. I get a notion about something. Like I have a notion what's going to happen at John Berggruen's show. I have a notion because I'm working with some drawings that I did in 1981. But I have no way that I could begin to tell you how I'm going to present this, how it's going to be completed. Now I believe in hope, I believe in God, and I believe in trust. And the trust part of all this is me getting to the studio every day. Not so much now, but it was a few years ago. I still spend five days a week here, sometimes more. If, I suppose if I wasn't married I'd be here seven days. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: [chuckles]

FLETCHER BENTON: . . . which wouldn't be all so bad. But I have this philosophy that if the artist goes to his

studio, with nothing on his mind, the very fact that he is in the studio, he is sitting there with a chain of events that have made his studio whatever it is, that there is a superior thing that happens to most artists. I call it the Magic Man; you can call it whatever you want. But he sort of makes the rounds, you know. Goes around, sees everybody from time to time, lays one [me, your]. You know, there have been several times I've been sitting thinking about something totally unrelated, and bang! I get a tremendous jolt that, oh! that's the answer. I won't even be thinking about the problem, but the answer appears. And I know that's not peculiar to me; everybody has had those experiences. But in terms of the studio, when that happens, to me that's the Magic Man. He's just come by, and he's laid it on me. If I am not in the studio, if I don't come to the studio, if I'm elsewhere, I don't think these things would happen as much. So I go there and I wait in my studio for something to happen. I don't go there knowing what's going to happen. And each time I get going on something, I'm going at it with not the foggiest idea where I'm going to end up. I have certain momentums that I'm dealing with that are basically already in progress within myself that are taking me, leading me along, that are pushing me in a certain direction, but I don't know what's going to happen that day. But I know that if I present myself there at the studio, if I leave myself open, that something will happen. I've believed that my whole life. And it does. Because for me boredom is the most powerful creative spirit that I've ever experienced. All I need to do is get good and bored—and I can get that very quickly—and I start, I start doing something. It's just like an automatic, automatic thing. I need to entertain myself. Maybe, maybe I've just said it there. Maybe just this whole thing is nothing more than self-entertainment. Who knows? I do find it entertaining. It's pleasurable. There's, there are certainly struggles. I mean, I'm not, you know, just going along without some hurt and some of the other things. But, yeah, it's entertainment. Maybe that's it, Paul. After. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: After all that, yeah.

FLETCHER BENTON: . . . seven tapes, maybe that's it! [laughing]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, is that then what you offer people, through your work?

FLETCHER BENTON: I don't know. May be. I'll tell you this, that I love to fight.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, that's what I gather from your. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: We were talking about it. I mean, I love to get in there and slug it out, whether it's physically or. . . . You know, I don't go around. . . . I'm not particularly strong either, but I like the battle. I like the challenge. The challenge, maybe that's a better word. And every time I get down to the bone pile and the table down there, I go to war, I go to battle. It's not a vacation. I don't go there and sit there and wait for lovely things to happen. It's a struggle. Every piece starts out with confrontation. There's no way I can avoid that. That is, that is just as sure as anything. I start off with a base plate and a couple things to get. . . . I have to go beyond three in order to get to the point where I can make a choice. You can't make a choice between two, because you only have one. So I always start off with three somethings. Then I can add to that or eliminate, but from that moment on, it is, it is to win. And to win is that wonderful feeling, and in the process there's a lot of entertainment. I whistle a lot when I work.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It's like the seven dwarfs. [chuckles] [referring to "Whistle While You Work," a song from Walt Disney's Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs]

FLETCHER BENTON: Yeah, it's awful, it's awful.

[Tape 7, side A]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Now, it was interesting what you were saying a few minutes ago. Interesting to me, anyway. That you enjoy the challenge, engaging the work, or the struggle. . . . The struggle. The process, is what you're talking about.

FLETCHER BENTON: Not so much the process, no.

PAUL KARLSTROM: The interaction, the activity. Is that right?

FLETCHER BENTON: Getting from start to finish. The process, if you're referring to the process, the welding part, the sanding. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: No.

FLETCHER BENTON: You're talking about the creative process, yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, that's what I mean.

FLETCHER BENTON: All right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: The process of moving from concept—or even a vague idea of where you're gonna end up—getting from here to there. That's what I mean by the process.

FLETCHER BENTON: Yes, okay, all right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And this makes me wonder, is that what you hope is revealed in the work of art? Here's the work of art then, a document of this process for you.

FLETCHER BENTON: I hadn't ever thought of it that way.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well?

FLETCHER BENTON: That's a good question. I don't think so. I don't think my work shows the travel map, as do Diebenkorn's paintings. I mean, you can follow to some degree—I don't know, maybe more superficial in his later work—you can follow the trip to some degree. In my work, you can follow the trip if I don't cover up the grinding marks. But as soon as I cover up the grinding marks, the trip is covered up.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But you talk about your work as a series of decisions.

FLETCHER BENTON: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Is that right?

FLETCHER BENTON: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And presumably, to a sensitive observer, perhaps, some of those decisions would be evident. And that's asking a lot of an observer, because basically what you're creating something, as you've described, where there's neither too much, too little, that if anything were changed, taken away or added, that there would be something wrong. And that's the way you described what you were shooting for. Presumably, or perhaps, the sensitive observer could become involved in looking at your work, in thinking about decisions that were made. Why is this piece, which has no reference to anything in nature as far as I could see, except geometric shapes, why does it look the way it looks? What are we looking at, by the way. It's sitting on your big glass coffee table here, there is a piece that. . . . Well, it's not a Steel Watercolor. It, well, it's not colored, it's not. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: No, but there are Steel Watercolors that were not painted.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay, so it's a Steel Drawing.

FLETCHER BENTON: No, it's a Steel Watercolor, only it's not painted.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay. All right. It could be. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: Now, I just have to correct that because. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: It could be painted, right?

FLETCHER BENTON: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: This very piece could be painted.

FLETCHER BENTON: Yes. But it will not.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It will not.

FLETCHER BENTON: Because it's a maquette. It's the maquette for the big 18-foot piece down in the front room.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah. Okay.

FLETCHER BENTON: This one will never be painted. That I'm for sure of.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What's it called? The maquette for. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: It's Steel Watercolor number something.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, and, right, you don't know. [chuckles]

FLETCHER BENTON: I don't even know. You know, I started to try to title my works, because it's always more romantic to have a title for . . . than a number. I mean, people get off on titles. And just for the fun of it, I tried it.

I had two pieces up here. That one is Black Iris, not named after. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Which one's that?

FLETCHER BENTON: This one over here.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Ah hah, okay.

FLETCHER BENTON: It's certainly not named after [Georgia] O'Keeffe's Black Iris. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: No.

FLETCHER BENTON: . . . but it was just Black Iris. And another one I called China Moon. And when I told. . . . And that's The Yellow Banana over there. So those three had. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Which one's Yellow Banana?

FLETCHER BENTON: The one over there by the. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay, I see The Yellow Banana, you've got. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: But people just really got turned on. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: If they had titles.

FLETCHER BENTON: . . . if they had titles. And I said, "Well," they said, "what's the title of this?" and I said, "That's Number 32."

PAUL KARLSTROM: They don't like that.

FLETCHER BENTON: No, they didn't like that at all.

PAUL KARLSTROM: They'd rather have Number 31. [chuckles]

FLETCHER BENTON: Now, if I'd have said, "This is The Stairway to Paradise and that's Number 32, all of a sudden, that's 32, and this has a title. So I mean, I'm not very smart. I should reach into myself and give every piece some sort of title. A lot of artists go the dictionary and they go through Greek mythology, or they do, you know. . . . Ah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right. Well, there's a problem with that, because then that does direct, it creates a reference.

FLETCHER BENTON: There is, that's true. With a title you create a reference and they say, "Where's the moon?"

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

FLETCHER BENTON: Or "Where's the yellow banana?" or "where's black iris?" or where's Ulysses, or whatever, you know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What's the. . . . Does the one that we were looking at yesterday, which you've moved now over there, and we talked about it on the tape, does that have a title?

FLETCHER BENTON: No, but let's get a title for it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It's a wonderful piece, by the way.

FLETCHER BENTON: Here's a chance for us to both be on [record]. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: I love that piece; it's a wonderful piece.

FLETCHER BENTON: . . . as doing, as titling a Fletcher Benton.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay.

FLETCHER BENTON: If you can't think of it now, keep it in mind. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay, let's think about it.

FLETCHER BENTON: . . . and we'll put it on tape, and we, and you can title that piece, because that's how much

titles mean to me.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay, we, that's a good way to make a point, actually. [chuckles] So we'll work on it.

FLETCHER BENTON: Not that you can't come up with a good title; I didn't mean this. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: No, no, I understand, so your point is that it's about that arbitrary.

FLETCHER BENTON: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Almost anything I would come up with would be, it's the same to you.

FLETCHER BENTON: And I think that's true of any artist in any artist's work. A title is as arbitrary as the signature. It has no meaning whatsoever except for cataloging, except for historians, and except for the ego of the people who buy it. They say, "Oh, yes, that's my . . ." whatever.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay, let's get back to the, to the other point, when I called our attention to this number something-or-other—you don't remember the number—right here in front of us on the coffee table and if you look at it carefully, if you bother to try to become involved with that piece, to pay attention—and most people don't, by the way. I'm sure you realize this.

FLETCHER BENTON: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I think it's the unusual person that pauses to try to establish a relationship with an object. They'll usually look very quickly and then look away. And maybe it leaves a little impression, but it's not something that they really look at. Okay, let's say that somebody does that. They're going to begin, the viewer's going to begin to ask questions why. Why this, why that? Why the steps? Why the triangle, the circle at that place? Why did the artist do. . . . There's a banana that's not painted down at the bottom.

FLETCHER BENTON: That's right. Actually that's a D.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And there's a vocabulary in there that if the viewer is. . . . It's a what?

FLETCHER BENTON: A D. It's a big, elongated D.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right, right, right.

FLETCHER BENTON: But it's also, could be a privy moon, could be a banana for jello.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What I'm suggesting. . . . I do believe that the viewer, more in the case of a work like this, which is nonobjective, than in a representational painting, where the information is given and familiar, more in this case, is going to try to find ways to comprehend, to apprehend. And in so doing, they're probably gonna try to second-guess the artist. It seems to me there may be with that response or effort on the part of the viewer, a move towards participating in process which involves decision, coming from A to B. I mean, you must think about how somebody responds to your work, when they bother to look at it, and what it is they're responding to. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: Actually I don't question why they respond to it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Or how they get a handle on it, no?

FLETCHER BENTON: I've never asked that question, like, "Why are you buying this piece instead of that piece?" I'm gonna do that the next time. I've never done that. Because there's a lot to choose from here, and I say, you know, they'll say, "Well, you know, I want this piece." Then I'm gonna say, "Why did you choose this piece over that piece?" and see what happens. It's gonna be interesting. But I have never done that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It just seems to me that if people are interested in the way you had assembled these forms they're going to wonder why. It's nonobjective and there has to be, they believe there has to be a reason for arranging things in a certain way, constructing, composing.

FLETCHER BENTON: Well, gravity. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: And so that becomes part of the meaning of the work, perhaps, is what I'm saying.

FLETCHER BENTON: Well, gravity does play an honest role in what I do. I mean, if you look at my Steel Watercolors, you'll see that there's not too much that is defying gravity in an illogical way, where I'm counting on the strength of the weld to be ridiculous about the positioning of the geometry. Oh boy, what a mouthful! So

there is a, there is somewhat a logic, somewhat a logic. For instance, this shepherd's staff here, this snake, or whatever you want to call it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Uh huh.

FLETCHER BENTON: If it were removed, it wouldn't be the same sculpture, right? No, it wouldn't.

PAUL KARLSTROM: No, it wouldn't.

FLETCHER BENTON: Because it's too important to the total piece. Whether you like the piece or not doesn't matter. But also it logically is holding the stairs up.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, that's right.

FLETCHER BENTON: From falling over. So as I put these things together, I must say that the practical part of me is in automatic.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Um hmm. Yeah, because of physics and things like that, certain things couldn't be.

FLETCHER BENTON: Yeah, that's right. And. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Gee, that's an orderly. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: I don't want to deal with that because it doesn't interest me. Now, for instance, here. This feather, which could be a banana, is leaning against the pole. It's also bracing it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Now this one has a name. We're looking at. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: This is Black Iris.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right, yeah.

FLETCHER BENTON: This orange circle is stopped here. These feathers are attached. They're hanging fairly plumb. You know, they're not doing some wild thing out here, [or, where]. . . . Not that one couldn't do that; it's just it's not within my interest. These things logically wouldn't really be in that position without some connection to something. So here's this, this line which has a certain romantic curve about it, at least for me, and it, and so on. Well, I just happen to like this piece, and I just feel that if I removed this feather, the piece isn't going to work. I mean, that feather is there for a very important reason to the composition. It's supportive, it's a part of the family, it's locked into its place. When I was painting, I never had that feeling. And it was one of the most frustrating things about my painting, because I would work on a painting day after day after day, and I would come back day after day. I'd be a different person day after day, and I'd see the damn picture differently, and it never, I could never get 'em finished. I mean, it was very hard for me to get finished. I just sort of took them as far as I could take them, and the very process of being, of falling out of love with the damn picture was the end of it. You know, it was a love affair from start to finish, and when I just got bored, finished, there was no more, no more interest, the thing was done. It wasn't like it had. . . . Do you know what I'm trying to say? It wasn't like there was a finish for the sake of "that's as much as I can do to it."

PAUL KARLSTROM: Um hmm.

FLETCHER BENTON: Whereas in these sculpture pieces, once I go past whoa, and I can come back and find whoa, then, then it is finished and I can abandon that piece. And when I abandon a piece—which I could never do with my paintings, damn it—but when I can abandon a piece, I can be very objective about it. I can sit back and talk to you about these pieces. They don't, I mean, they don't have to be my pieces. They can be just a piece. Because that thing is done. It's out of my life. It's finished. I never felt that with my two-dimensional work. There was always one more thing I could do to it. There was one more adjustment, there. . . . You know what I mean? I don't how other artists have spoken to you about that process, but in sculpture there comes a point where you have to give it—this is real corny; you've heard it before—but you've got to give birth to the damn thing, you know. You've got to get it on its way. Painting and sculpture are as far removed as any two things that you could possibly think of. They're as removed as swimming and walking. Yet people chuck them together. They say, "Well, you know, painting and sculpture, those are the fine arts." Oh, God, I mean, they don't even. . . . There's no connection. No connection. Sculpture reacts within the space. And there's no way that once you have been in a room where there's a sculpture that with the lights out you can ignore the fact that it's there. Maybe we talked about this earlier, I don't know, but I was talking to somebody about it recently. You see, painting is magic. Painting is magic. It's illusionary. It doesn't exist. It's a fool-your-eye situation. No matter what, you can't get around behind it. It's illusionary. It doesn't exist really. When the lights are out, that painting is gone. A piece of sculpture is just the reverse of that. If the lights are out you can still touch it. You can get around behind it. You can feel it up. Hah, hah!

PAUL KARLSTROM: [chuckling]

FLETCHER BENTON: You can feel right up that old skirt. You can feel it up; you can get the essence of it. It occupies space, therefore is totally real. I mean, you bump your knee against a piece of steel sculpture, damn it you're sore for two or three days. There's nothing illusionary about it. It's there, period. And having done both painting and sculpture, that part of the process of being a sculptor is very rewarding. I mean, I find very stimulating. And I said at the lecture that you introduced me at ["Eye of the Artist" series. California Palace of the Legion of Honor] that, in the very end, I said, "I love painting," and I do love painting. I mean that sincerely. I love painting. I wish I could be a painter. It's never gonna happen for me. But those guys who stay with three-dimensional form, in the traditional sense of. . . . I'm not talking about piling bricks up in a pile of sand and string and what-have-you, broken twigs. I'm talking about, you know, heavy metal stuff.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Um hmm.

FLETCHER BENTON: I believe—and I will, I'd be happy to defend it—that we are the chosen few. The commitment to sculpture is one that is more real than the commitment to painting. And therefore embodies a whole different set of realities. It's not a dream state. It's not. . . . Does that make any sense to you? I mean, painting to me was always in some other place. You know, I was reaching out for it, I was trying to capture it, I was trying to get ahold of it. Now I'm not anti-painting by any means. Not only do I love painting, not only would I love to be a painter, but some of the most exciting experiences of my life have been painting. Much more so than sculpture.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: But the guys that are still hanging in there, have made the commitment to sculpture in its bare-bones sense, are the chosen few. I mean, that's just the way I feel about it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You keep using the term "bone." You talk about the bone yard, you talk about. . . . And it seems to me this is revealing some connection, or may be revealing a connection with sculpture, the idea of the basic structure, the human skeleton, the bone, that with which you build, that which holds it up.

FLETCHER BENTON: [chuckling] I hadn't thought of that, but it could also be after the flesh and everything else is gone, what is left but the bones?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

FLETCHER BENTON: I mean, I don't know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I mean, the essense is [revealed through reduction].

FLETCHER BENTON: [laughing] That's really reaching out there.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Anyway we'll set that aside for a moment. I'm intrigued by this concern you have, or awareness, of the difference between painting and sculpture and this, not schizophrenia exactly but this dichotomy. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: It's close.

PAUL KARLSTROM: [chuckles] This dichotomy in your own experience and concern. And it strikes me that these Steel Watercolors, perhaps more than anything else in your work, represent a synthesis of the two interests and concerns. Color of course is one aspect of it, and reminds one of painting; indeed comes from the watercolors. It's not exclusive to painting certainly. But also, although as we move these Steel Watercolors around on the table, they change, as part of the posing, and then you change the composition, and that's a property of sculpture, which the painting doesn't have. But nonetheless. . . . Still, at any of those given points, these works seem to be a combination of the two, and I gather that they represent that for you, as a way to realize those interests. Is that true?

FLETCHER BENTON: I just plain don't know. The only thing I can say is that I thought I could, I thought I could always return to painting. I thought it was something that I could pick up where I left off. And I can't. I keep going back and trying, but it doesn't work. And I'm disappointed, because dammit, that pushing that paint around on the canvas was a wonderful thing. I mean, I really liked that a lot. You know, mixing colors and seeing secondaries happen, and especially—I mean, I try to do it in my painted Steel Watercolors—where you'll—boy oh boy—where you can slip in an orange next to some muted color, some bizarre color, and you get this wow! this, this, it's like drinking bubbly water, but it's in the retina. You get this wonderful discovery response to color. I mean, boy! I liked that a lot when I was painting. And I guess I get it in the sculpture in that as you walk around the sculpture you discover new relationships, and it's somewhat the same but not exactly. [It] affects a different

part of my head. You know, I'm reaching for the artist . . . the Impressionist, Vuillard. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: [Eduard] Vuillard, yeah.

FLETCHER BENTON: . . . is a typical example of this effervescence, retinal effervescence of color. That guy could make it happen for me.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Um hmm.

FLETCHER BENTON: And I used to, I used to work for that gaseous sort of wonderful, tingling sense of color. Well, you don't get that in sculpture, so that's all there is to that. I mean, you can't. . . . I thought I could have both. I really did. And I kept stopping sculpture to go back to the painting. I did the kinetic artwork hoping I could find some different way to express a two-dimensional painting, and it didn't fly. So, you know, it's not gonna happen for me in this life. It's just not. I may paint still lifes. I still have an easel and a palette and the colors, and I squirt 'em on every once in while. Maybe I'll do some still lifes. That's a good way to get [it] out of your system, wouldn't you say?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Maybe. Maybe so.

FLETCHER BENTON: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I still can't quite give up on this, though. The fact that you call these painted works Steel Watercolors suggests that you are seeking. . . . You want it both ways.

FLETCHER BENTON: I want it all. That's right. [laughs]

PAUL KARLSTROM: But you don't feel that, in fact, that quite achieves it. In other words you recognize, what? That they finally still are sculpture.

FLETCHER BENTON: Yes. They're not paintings. You know, the only guy that I know right off the bat—and I'm sure there are many—is one of my favorite sculptors, Robert Hudson. He is the one guy who is able to take painting and sculpture equally together. And he's the only one I know of that I have respect for. And I'm sorry for those that I don't know about. But Robert Hudson can take a—this is a very difficult problem, artistically difficult—to take a solid form. . . . He'll take a cube, he'll dissect and dissolve the very volume of that cube by making it a painting, by taking the three-dimensional surface and having it go away. And all of a sudden you perceive it as an illusionary painting, as. . . . I don't mean illusionary paintings, in that there is a group of illusionary painters. What I mean to say is he's dissolved the volumetric weight, cube, and has made it, has made it false, has made it not exist as a solid cube, but has deceived the eye as painting deceives the eye. The only guy, if you think about it, that can do it. On the other hand, when he does these large paintings, he's not. . . . I mean, in a way he's sort of, well, he's taken a long walk [from?] Kandinsky; there's no question about that. But you don't get the sense that his paintings are trying to give you through perspective and this and that the illusion of three-dimensional form so much. You know what I'm saying there?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Um hmm.

FLETCHER BENTON: That's very interesting. So he is a master, in my mind. Plus he will come along—you talk about dichotomy—he'll come along and hang a bunch of feathers on a steel cube, which has been painted to look like something else. I mean it's . . . why do the cube in the first place?

PAUL KARLSTROM: You're often described as a constructivist. The term is bandied around in connection with your work, and that of others, other sculptors. Again [Thomas] Albright invokes this term. And I would be interested to know what that term means to you in, well, number one, in an art historical sense, or who does that, who do you associate with that? But secondly, in terms of application. Do you think that that is a useful term in connection with your work, the forms that you create?

FLETCHER BENTON: Well, I'm not even sure what a constructivist is anymore because it's been misused so often. Would it be fair to say that a constructivist is a builder? Put things, builds things up, or builds things, I mean, not up maybe, but puts things together to build them? Is that a constructivist?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, I suppose so. I guess I'm thinking more in connection with early twentieth century. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: For example. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . in some Bauhaus-related artists.

FLETCHER BENTON: Sure. So you're talking about Kandinsky, Malevich, Mondrian. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: A lot of them were Dutch.

FLETCHER BENTON: Right. You're talking about the Italian Futurists? [Balla?]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, a little less so. But what about Kandinsky? Let's just take Kandinsky, and you know some of his series. I can think of some that actually look a bit like your watercolors, if you want to know the truth.

FLETCHER BENTON: Well, Kandinsky was, was a painter. Malevich was a composer. You don't see a painterly feeling in Malevich.

PAUL KARLSTROM: No, [no, right].

FLETCHER BENTON: And we often play a game which Ann [Karlstrom] and you and I'll have to play some night, and that is if you were in the twenty-second century writing a book on twentieth-century art, you were commissioned to do it, and you only had ten artists to write [about], which ten would they be? The interesting thing is part, about that game is that I have to agree with Robert Hughes [Shock of the New—Ed.] in that constructivism was the last original art form that we know about so far. That anything after that was just rehash. And since I do accept that, and if I were to put someone in my ten that was from the constructivist or Bauhaus period, who would it be? Would it be Kandinsky or would it be Malevich, some days it's Kandinsky, and some days it's Malevich. I think Malevich was infinitely more consistent. I think Kandinsky was the teacher. And the support of much of what he did was what he had written, and his teaching, his influence, through the Bauhaus group. It would be hard for me to, I mean, it would be very difficult for me to choose which one of those I felt most important, if I had to choose. But since we don't have to here, I think they're both important, but I think Kandinsky definitely had the sense of a painter. I mean, he liked the tactile quality of mixing it up and putting it on and, you know. Not true of Malevich.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I suspect then that you do feel some kinship with that circle, that phenomenon—and I don't feel necessarily any one of the artists has a direct influence, but their interests and concerns, that you relate yourself more to that. . . . There are only a few traditions within modern art. This is clearly one of them.

FLETCHER BENTON: Yeah. Okay. Yes, I would say that I belong, I belong in the twenties and thirties. Much of the Steel Watercolors in my mind as I started doing them some time ago, I'd seen, I had seen quite a bit of work from the constructivist period, and I do find that that's where I am.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Um hmm.

FLETCHER BENTON: I mean, if you were to say, "Fletcher, where are you? Where can I find you?" I'd say, "Look in the twenties and thirties." That's where I am now. Maybe I'm never going to get out of there, but that's where I am. But there's something about that basic discipline that the Bauhaus group [preached] that our world might be better if it had [chuckles] some of these controlled things. I mean, I really don't agree with it that much. I mean, the Swedish people have pink jail. . . .

[Tape 7, side B]

PAUL KARLSTROM: I don't think we want to pursue the notion of Swedish pink jailhouses. [said with a smile—Ed.]

FLETCHER BENTON: Okay.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right, okay? [laughs]

FLETCHER BENTON: [chuckles] I do fit there. I don't take as seriously this business "The world's going to be better if there are pink jails." But I definitely build my stuff.

PAUL KARLSTROM: One of the things. . . . I don't know if I want to push this very far; that's for sure. But in much Bauhaus-related constructivist, design-connected—we'll use that term—work there seems to be a lack of warmth often, a lack of a sense of humor.

FLETCHER BENTON: That's true.

PAUL KARLSTROM: This is not the case, I think, with your work.

FLETCHER BENTON: I hope not.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And I don't think it's the case with some others [involved]. Certainly we can think of certain artists, Europeans, and in a few cases American, that have a really wonderful sense of humor and playfulness in their work. Now one of them is—hardly a constructivist, but is. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: [Jean] Tingley.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, right, and then I'm thinking of Bauhaus-related, non-constructivist, Paul Klee.

FLETCHER BENTON: Oh, yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And then, getting closer to home, and closer to sculpture, there's [Alexander] Calder. And we were talking a little bit about Calder at lunch, and I'd be interested to have your thoughts on Calder, how you would describe him, and what, again, what kinship if any you might feel with him.

FLETCHER BENTON: I had the chance to meet Calder before he died and I didn't go to Europe to do it, and I regret it. He, to me, was one of the few sculptors who did, who worked, did a lot of work, maintained his childhood. He protected it, he maintained it, he nurtured it, he. . . . He just really is about tops in sculpture for guys who could do that. He kept his privacy, above all. He, to my knowledge, didn't have workers in the studio. So I think he, I think his contribution was a deadend. I mean it's awfully hard to pick up where Calder left off. [chuckling] And maybe I'm repeating myself. I hope not. But it's just as dangerous to think that anybody could pick up where [Jackson] Pollock left off. You know, both these guys did wonderful things, and that's about it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So these are the definitive statements? You know, that's it. They capped it. That is the statement, in your opinion, in those areas.

FLETCHER BENTON: I hope my work is seen, especially the. . . . After the Folded Square pieces, they were serious pieces. I mean, there's some humor in them, but in a way they were more Bauhaus than anything else I had done, the Circles and Squares. They were deliberate, deliberately trying to solve a very hard problem I set for myself. One was breaking a flat circle into something that was interesting, three-dimensional. And the other was the square, which is infinitely and forever connected to the circle. I think the circle represents the first thing that man ever worshipped to any degree. And in the worshipping of the circle, we had the square. That's the uptight, sort of somewhat civilized part of, you know, the eternal circle. But in my mind it's the chicken and egg thing. And I wanted to set forth a problem in both those where I had to make something out of a given, without funny stuff, without any adding to or subtracting from. All I could do was cut, fold out, and redesignate the parts. But that in the final analysis they had to fall back into a complete and given circle and/or complete and given square. Well, when I got that out of my system, and really felt a little more secure—I've said this before in lectures—the Folded Circle and Folded Square works were my first steps outside of the kinetic world, and they were the first steps into the three-dimensional world, and I was damn insecure. I was very insecure. And in a way both the circle and the square were my security blanket. I mean, I was sort of going along sucking on my pacifier and feeling my blanket. But when I got into the more arbitrary statements of Balanced/ Unbalanced—which also had alphabet forms in them; there's the wedge piece over there—I was then able, I was then moving shapes not from a given source, but separate shapes. . . . I was, I could deal with them in a way that didn't have to conform to something. You know, to a prestated thing.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Um hmm.

FLETCHER BENTON: Then, with the Steel Watercolors, they go even further, because I was dealing less with volume and more with line, and I was dealing with fat and skinny, rather than just sort of fat and volumetric. Constructivists Edward Lucie-Smith tied me in with [Max Bill]. Getting back to flatness, getting back to total control, and getting back to art form that is serious without personality, without humor, without anything. Without love. I'm not, I don't belong with Max Bill. I mean, that's. . . . I just don't belong there.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And you don't want to belong there.

FLETCHER BENTON: I don't care. But, no, I don't want to belong; that's true. But I mean, he worked in such tight confines that. . . . And he's like a guy walking down the street with the wrong size underwear on. I mean, his balls must have hurt a lot. No, I'm not tied to Max Bill at all. My work is getting freer, less connected to the circle and the square certainly. And I'm having more fun, and hopefully in the process they're taking on some of this sense of security about, about what I'm up to. I'd be the first to admit that the highly polished surfaces on the Folded Circle Ring series, the bronzes; the very sophisticated patinas, which I developed myself—they were low-heat patinas; and all of those things were, was the only way really I could step into the world of three-dimension at the time. I was pretty well beat up. When I quit doing kinetic work, I was totally beat up. Not pretty well, but totally. It's. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Why? Why. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: Well, I had seven galleries throughout the world.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Um hmm.

FLETCHER BENTON: I had galleries. . . . I had three in South America, I had one in Los Angeles, one in New York, one in San Francisco—there's six—I had one in Brussels—seven—and I. . . . Yeah, that's it, seven. And I called 'em up and I said, "It's all over. No more work." And my career was at the very peak at the time. I suppose that was a good time to move on, but I was aware that I was not interested in going any further. There was nothing, there was no kick left. I just didn't. . . . It was finished. And I'm, I'm great at saying, "Look, I made a mistake. I'm sorry." Now I'm not saying that I am a good person to say, "I made a mistake and I'm sorry; that's why I quit kinetic art." That's not it at all. But I'm the first person to say, "Look, I took kinetic art as far as I want to go. It's finished. If you think Fletcher Benton's gonna sit around here at the peak of his career, at 45 or whatever the hell it was, and keep on doing something because the world want's to buy it, you're sorely mistaken." 'Cause I'm not made that way, Paul. That is not the way I am made at all.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did you have pressure exerted on you?

FLETCHER BENTON: Yeah, sure I did. I had two little kids. I had a lot of rent.

PAUL KARLSTROM: No, well, I mean from dealers.

FLETCHER BENTON: Well, I'm getting to that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh.

FLETCHER BENTON: And I had pressure from dealers, oh yes. They said, "Well, what are you doing? You're wrecking your career." And I said, "Look, it's my career. You didn't get me to the point where I even had a choice of wrecking it, so, you know, just get out of my way." So there was a period of two or three years where I had no gallery representation. I had no idea what the hell was going to come. But, you know, I truly believed in that thing I told you, the little story about the Magic Man, that all I had to do was get bored, go to the studio—or go to the studio and get bored, I guess the better way to do it—and something was gonna happen. Maybe it wasn't going to go anywhere, but it was going to satisfy me. So I don't think that I'm going to have that problem again. I don't think there's going to be throwing on the brakes and taking a 180-degree turn again. These, where I am now, I think there, I think it's, it's where I want to be. You know, I'm not forcing myself in any way to do anything. I'm here for very natural reasons. By natural I mean I'm here because of circumstances, and I don't intend to crank out the same work year after year after year, and I want the public to know that I am not going to look the same in 1996 as I look now, and it may be totally different work. I may be onto something that would be hard to even connect to Folded Circle, Folded Square. But hopefully the sense of it all will be somewhat another link in the chain.

PAUL KARLSTROM: The kinetic work, in retrospect—and acknowledging that that's certainly what made you famous. I mean, you just were sort of catapulted, I think, into prominence, international prominence, because of these works. So it's obvious that that was a contribution to your career, or at least a factor, in your. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: A big one.

PAUL KARLSTROM: A big factor. But beyond that, what role did the kinetic involvement play for you?

FLETCHER BENTON: Okay. I think that the kinetic involvement, the later pieces, the color pieces, I didn't need to make as many as I made. I think I kept trying to get, to push it farther, and I wasn't willing to go into a higher technology, as I told you earlier; I was working with the most basic Wilbur Wright bicycle stuff. And there were certain limits within that, that I really reached those limits before I knew I'd reached them. Maybe the art people saw it, and said, "Look, Benton's reached his limits there," or whatever. But I think in the kinetic pieces, the early pieces that were so systematic, that went from one dot to two dots and back to one dot. That's all there was to 'em. But there was something, at least for me there was enough there that it was okay. Then I went into the machine pieces, of which there were maybe twenty, twenty-five pieces, that's all. Twenty pieces. Kaleidoscopes and graphic things that were—by graphic I mean plastic things, graphic things that were in motion that created a sort of a changing composition—were rather sophisticated in terms of what was going on in the kinetic world. There was nobody else working that way. Nor was there anyone else working with the transparencies when I first started it. There was a Swedish guy picked up on it later. The Swiss did a watch that was a straight ripoff from one of my Continuous Radius Triangle pieces, but so what. But the thing is, it may have been over before I knew it, and if there are any regrets, it's that, that I may not have seen the end of the road when I should have. I don't regret the kinetic work. I don't know how important it is. I would say, compared to what I'm doing now, it's probably not even important. I don't think it made a great art statement. It was not making the statement that I had hoped. [But] I think it reflected where I was at that time. I think the machine pieces came closer to where I am now than the sprayed-on lacquers, and the light pieces. I did a whole series of light pieces, dealing with what I called the Dopler principle in light. Where one would get the sense that the light coming from a distance, coming to you, passing beyond you, and going away as the Dopler thing is about sound, you know, the pitch of sound. I may have made fifteen or twenty of those. Well, I could have probably made one and done it. But what happened was the principle remained the same in each piece, and where I was getting my

thrills was in changing the box in which this thing functioned.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

FLETCHER BENTON: I even had a huge one that rolled back and forth on a big track hanging from the ceiling. But [a part, apart] of the machine art, there's a little film left somewhere—I have it at home—of a show that I had at the San Francisco Art Institute, of my first kinetic show, that really knocked people off their pins here. I mean, they just had never seen anything like it. I had a sculpture that hung from the ceiling, and I had the track—it was like a curtain rod—but the track hung from the ceiling, but it went into a rather irregular tracing around the gallery. And hanging down from that, on a stem, were two cylinders which had light, color change, and sound in them. And at the top of the rod that hooked onto the track was a motor, and this thing traveled all around the gallery. It was like an upside-down train. And it had a little noise mechanism on it. And I remember during the opening people were jammed in there, and having drinks, and all of a sudden you'd hear this thing go off, and it would run into somebody that was standing there drinking, but it wasn't really fast. It was in very slow. . . . We had one wall that it finally, when it got through the gallery, would pass right through the wall. We had the same shape cut out in the wall, and this thing just fit in that negative space and traveled right through the wall. Well, those machine pieces I am most proud of. And maybe one or two of the color pieces. The Continuous Radius Triangle, and maybe one of the early striped pieces, the one [collector] Hunk Anderson has, the maquette for the Oakland [Museum] window. Now that I look back on it, there was really no need to go beyond that. But I didn't know at that time. You know, I didn't realize maybe that I was at the whoa place—we were talking about whoa earlier.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Um hmm.

FLETCHER BENTON: So I went way beyond whoa. But on the other hand I feel that I. . . . I just feel that getting all that out of my system was wonderful. It's finished, it's gone, it's history, and I'm better for it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It's interesting that that for which you're still, I guess, best known—at least outside of this area—is something that you feel, well, represented simply a phase in your development, as something you had to go through but certainly you wouldn't point to that as the definitive. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: No.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . the essential Fletcher Benton.

FLETCHER BENTON: No.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It is interesting though how in [the] coming together of a certain expression and a time, and at that time what you happen to be doing, for whatever reasons, you pursued these interests and created these forms that fit in and were picked up, and whatever it is now, moves. It moves. [chuckles, realizing he's made a pun—Ed.]

FLETCHER BENTON: Probably. . . . Right, it moves. [chuckles] Probably the tightest show I ever had was that show at Gump's. I wish to hell I had that show, pieces left of it, I have one piece.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Now, is the same one that was taken down?

FLETCHER BENTON: They took down.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Why don't you, why don't you tell a little bit about that, in the. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: Well. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: I'd like you to start, if you would, by describing the pieces and what you were trying to do with them, or why you made them the way you did. They sound charming.

FLETCHER BENTON: Yeah, oh, it was a lot of fun. I'd gone to Europe in 1959 and '60 after I was teaching at Arts and Crafts. I was there for one semester. I went over to Europe. I did the Cite ' University thing. Fulbright students arrived there and they were so full of college I couldn't stand it, and I took a studio outside of Paris and did some very large watercolors that were later shown in New York. And I hung around Paris for a while, came back to New York, had a bad thing there, couldn't make it work, and it was, it was a cold winter in 1960, and I ended up in Ohio, from there recuperated, got rid of my gingivitis and went on back to California. And I got back here and I just felt that my painting was. . . . I felt second-rate. You know, I think every artist—God, I hope every artist has had this experience, because it's very refreshing, in retrospect—but you feel second-rate. And, you know, like I told you earlier, Joan Brown and Manuel [Neri] and all these people were doing such exciting things, and [I'd see them] then I'd come home in my studio and look at my paintings, and I'd think, "Oh, Christ. You know, this can't go on."

PAUL KARLSTROM: [chuckles]

FLETCHER BENTON: And I met Charlie Mattox at the time and Charlie Mattox was fiddling around with some graphic stuff, and he was a framer then. He was doing some motorized things. It kind of turned me on, and—pardon the pun. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: [chuckles]

FLETCHER BENTON: . . . and I thought, "Well, you know, I'm gonna try to do this with the figure," and I remember telling Helen Henninger that I had a few works, I wanted her to come and see 'em, and I said, "There's some animation. It's almost like where Walt Disney was," and I don't know why I said that, because there was no relationship whatsoever, but. . . . What I was doing was I was taking canvas and I was painting very geometric shapes, like a target—no relationship to [Kenneth] Noland—but I was doing a target and I was using a lot of silver paint at that time, with white and then the primary colors—again back to the guy that had the used farm machinery. And each painting had a figure that was about nine inches tall cut out of balsa wood. It was a hunk of balsa wood that was three-quarters an inch thick, three inches wide, seven or eight or ten inches long, and I carved out these figures. They were actually my wife.

PAUL KARLSTROM: [chuckles]

FLETCHER BENTON: I've never told anybody this before. I'd just met Bobbie. We weren't married at that time, but we knew we were going to be. And these were stylistic [stylized] interpretations of her. The hair. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Now wait a minute, wait a minute. Are these based on figure drawings then?

FLETCHER BENTON: No, they were. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Just really. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: It just was a very stylized figure. It was two legs, a torso, two arms, and a head. But no detail. It was almost like a cutout silhouette. The arms were always—not always—yes, they were—all out in this position. It was this figure. It was like. . . . This was the figure. [demonstrating—Ed.]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Um hmm, um hmm.

FLETCHER BENTON: Arms out to the, horizontal to the floor, legs spread apart, looking straight ahead, the hair was cut short, hair was black, there was a red line through the hair—Bobbie had a little bit of red in her hair, so I just did it by putting a red line through this black hair. The face, there was nothing on the face. Let's see, did I have. . . . There was, I don't think there was a face. For nipples, there were two little red spots for nipples. Underneath the arms there were black hair, and black pubic hair. And that was it. The figure itself was painted alizeran crimson with white mixed in it, and that gives you that shocking pink color. So they were painted this pink. And that was it. They had been cut out with a knife so that it was not a bandsaw cut like a cookie.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right, right, um hmm.

FLETCHER BENTON: But it had been, the edges had been cut, but then I'd gone in and smoothed off and whittled off the edges so that they were slightly round.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So it's almost modeled.

FLETCHER BENTON: Yes, somewhat modeled. And these figures were in this show. . . . Gosh, and there was no photos either, dammit. I was so upset when the show came down that I destroyed most of the work. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Ohh. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: This figure, the same figure—Bobby—was doing all sorts of things. I had hanging from the ceiling a trapeze, very small trapeze. It was maybe six inches wide at the bar, but had a rod that went up to the ceiling. And she was hanging on this bar, swinging back and forth. And I had a little motor up there that made this thing. . . . Here she was swinging back and forth. And all the guys at Gumps, they just loved this circus idea, and they had made large felt banners, with the circus feeling about it. And the gallery was done like a circus tent.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You must have loved it.

FLETCHER BENTON: Well, I did. I didn't expect all that, but that's what they did, and that was what the installation was about. And at that time, I was not familiar with Calder's circus, so this wasn't even related to it in any way.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Um hmm.

FLETCHER BENTON: So I had Bobbie also on a tightwire that went clear across the gallery, and she was standing on a bicycle, unicycle, with her arms out. Coming out her arms were long steel rods that are used in model airplanes. They're called piano rods. They're steel rods. And I had fish weights on each one of those, so that she was balanced there, you know. And she was on this unicycle. I had her in an airplane. I built this funny biplane, and she sitting in the cockpit, with a, I had a little silk scarf off the top of her head, and we had a fan up there, and the fan blowing this scarf, and the propeller was going around on the airplane. I had her on several canvases, which, one you saw in my lecture, where she was doing. . . . There were two of her, and she was doing the cancan, one leg was moving back and forth.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right, right.

FLETCHER BENTON: There must have been, I don't know, fifteen to twenty Bobbies in that show, in all sorts of very funny things, you know. Not sexual at all. There's nothing. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: My God! Well, the woman who was running Gump's at that time was an uptight old lady. She was probably in her sixties, seventies maybe. Just about shit when she walked in there and saw all these pink, shocking pink. . . . Penis-head pink. Well, even pinker than that, but I'd really got to her. And she put the kaybosh [kibosh] on the show. We installed it on Friday. Saturday morning I went down to see how it looked. 'Cause I was tired, [I left] the installation [before all] of the panels were up, so I had. . . . There was nothing there; it was all down! And I was so shocked. And Richard Gump, I knew him at the time, and he. . . . He is great guy. He, he is a terrific guy. He spent a couple weeks in jail protesting the arrest of a prostitute in North Beach. I mean, that's the kind of guy he was, and to have some bag like that down there, dictating the. . . . So anyway, I got a lawyer, Chauncey McKeever, who was involved in the arts. He's still around. He was involved in the arts, and I went to Chauncey, and said, "Let's sue 'em," so we sued Gump's, and Richard came over, and we sat in the studio and drank, and he said, "Oh, shit, Fletcher, what are you doing this for?" and I said, "Dammit, you. . ." So we decided. . . . It got in the papers. Jim Monte did a big article in Artforum about it, and, you know, and finally after two or three weeks, I'd calmed down enough and Richard called me up and said, "Look," he says, "we'll do. . . ." I had this huge five-panel painting, huge picture of a landscape of from the Valley of the Moon, and it was painted as if you were on an airplane just coming into a landing strip, so you had this vast panorama. He said, "Fletcher, we'll put your big painting up and we'll do this, and we'll do that, and let's just forget this thing." So by that time, I was so. . . . I'd given away all my paints. I mean, I hung it up right there and then. That was it. So we, he put the painting up, we forgot the whole thing, and then that's when I started doing the basic geometric shapes of one dot becoming two dots, or two dots becoming three dots, or a cross becoming a zigzag, and so on and so on. I'll show you photos later. The difference between those motorized wall pieces and the Gumps show was that the Gumps show was made up of wigwag motors. These were motors that were used in liquor stores for those. . . . They still use 'em. You go into a liquor store and you. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: [demonstrates]

FLETCHER BENTON: Yeah, those things that wiggle.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

FLETCHER BENTON: They're battery-driven little motors. And I had gotten a bunch of 'em from a liquor store. So the Gumps show was all battery powered. The painting hung on the wall, the batteries were behind it, inside of the stretcher bars of the back of the canvas, and here this thing's moving in, you know, you didn't see any wires or anything. But then when I decided that I was never going to paint again, I got some timing motors, which were 110 power, and the kinetic, Fletcher Benton kinetic artist began. And that's how it started. It was not, I didn't ever set out to do it, but that's how it happened. And the Gumps show to this day, it just really tears me up that some of those pieces didn't survive. You know, it's just too bad. Too bad for me. Not that they had any worth to anybody else, it's just that. . . . What was left from that show was in my old studio. I was in Europe—this was some years later—and I told the guys to move me to the new building while we were gone. That stuff, and including the piece that was at that Art Institute that went through the wall, that I was telling you about.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Um hmm.

FLETCHER BENTON: All went to the dump by mistake.

PAUL KARLSTROM: By mistake!

FLETCHER BENTON: By mistake. Now, [so] it's all gone.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you didn't then in your disappointment destroy these works from the Gumps show?

FLETCHER BENTON: No, no. But they were shoved aside, and not taken care of, and then ended up at the dump.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And then it's not like David Park. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: No.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . who supposedly tore up all his [Abstract Expressionist work]. . . .

FLETCHER BENTON: No, not at all.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So in a sense Bobbie pushed you, or the experience with that show, that Bobbie really introduced you to the kinetic thing, in a sense.

FLETCHER BENTON: The love affair with Bobbie, our courtship, was very responsible for what happened to me, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: See, and I've been saying that your work was very closely tied to your life.

FLETCHER BENTON: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I think what. . . . We're running out of tape, and I think we probably should wrap. There are more things to pursue, and we'll have another opportunity to do that, but I think that this is a good core of information, at least for this stage, so on behalf of the Archives, Fletcher, I want to thank you.

FLETCHER BENTON: Thank you, for lunch.

PAUL KARLSTROM: [chuckles]

END OF INTERVIEW

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