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Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Gene Davis, 1981 April 23

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Gene Davis on April 23, 1981. The interview took place in Washington, DC, and was conducted by Buck Pennington for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

BUCK PENNINGTON: I thought we would begin by going back and I wanted to get on tape in detail and sort of explore some of the things you had mentioned to me earlier about your earlier writing career, because I was very intrigued by that -- when you were writing your pulp stories, and your suspense stories. How did that get started?

GENE DAVIS: I don't really -- you see, I have a second career, which is my writing and my journalism. Which, believe it or not, if you look me up in Who's Who, none of that is mentioned at all; it's just the art stuff. Which is rather unusual, I think. And I see no reason to tamper with that --

BUCK PENNINGTON: So there's almost a duality there.

GENE DAVIS: Yes, there really is. Of course, I earned my living as a writer for something like 35 years before I really was successful enough as an artist to quit my job and to paint full-time. And that took place in 1968.

BUCK PENNINGTON: So it's been quite recently, then, that you've been just being a full-time artist.

GENE DAVIS: Oh yes. In fact, painting started out to be a hobby with me. The idea of my ever making a livelihood out of painting was the farthest thing from my mind.

BUCK PENNINGTON: When did you first start to get interested in visual art -- in doing visual art yourself?

GENE DAVIS: Well, as you probably -- this is going to rehash some of the other interviews but you probably know this from the Wall interview, I believe -- when I was eight, nine years old, somewhere in that vicinity, I used to do little childlike drawings and I sent them in to the Washington Post "Children's Page" -- they had a regular "Children's Page" -- and they thought enough of them to publish several of them, one of which won a $1 prize, which was the thrill of a lifetime, of course, in those days. So my interest in visual art goes back to early childhood. And then I took -- I guess it was about a two- or three-hour-a-day drawing course, three times a week, in high school. I had a very good teacher, whom I respected. I remember doing a charcoal drawing of Paderewski, the pianist, a hero of my mother's. I took it home and presented it to her proudly and she liked it. That's the only memory that I really have of that drawing course, but I suppose it wasn't wasted, because I did pick up certain rudimentary things that maybe have stuck with me, I don't know. But then there was a long hiatus there, where I was in the writing --

BUCK PENNINGTON: You were into words and not images.

GENE DAVIS: Quite.

BUCK PENNINGTON: That's what intrigued me -- because this relationship between thinking, and then words come out, and then imagining, and pictures come out, is a great deal to go on in one artist's imagination and mind.

GENE DAVIS: Well, I was rather a dilettante, I'm afraid, as a writer. I wrote a number of poems which were published in small poetry magazines. Now, the exact magazines they were published in would be in the book by Steven Naifeh which comes out -- it's in his thesis, which is being prepared now, at Harvard. He looked it up, I can't remember which -- one of them was the Florida Magazine of Verse, I remember -- [Buck laughs] -- and I think I got one published in the old Washington Times-Herald, which was a Hearst newspaper that no longer exists. I remember that the subject matter of many of my poems, believe it or not, was racial prejudice. And I remember writing a poem about racism. That word wasn't even coined then, but racial-intolerance. Of course, I had all the idealism of youth.

BUCK PENNINGTON: Did you conceive of yourself as a liberal in those days?

GENE DAVIS: Oh yeah, sure. I remember that one of the places that I really wanted to get published was New Masses, the Marxist magazine. And I sent a number of poems in to New Masses. The poetry editor was a woman named Joy Davidnow [phon.sp.]. I think she was also a minor poet. But she wrote me back to compliment me

highly on the poem. They didn't publish it (maybe just as well), but she invited me to send in more things and gave me a great deal of encouragement. That shows you a little bit of the political turn of mind I had in those days.

BUCK PENNINGTON: So then you were beginning to get involved in painting, and going about and looking at painting -- you went to the Phillips Gallery, and --

GENE DAVIS: Well, I can't remember the first time I ever went to the Phillips Gallery. I think it goes back quite a ways, since I'm a native Washingtonian. But really any intensity of interest was delayed until my late 20s. Because during my early 20s, I was a very happy newspaperman. I covered the White House for five years. That was very heady stuff for a young guy -- at 25 years old, I was traveling with the President of the United States [several inaudible phrases follow] And then I did write some pulp stories. Not a lot of them, but enough to sell a couple and make some money. I think you got a penny a word for them in those days -- so the more wordy you were, the more you got paid. [Buck: laughs]

BUCK PENNINGTON: Like a Victorian serialist.

GENE DAVIS: Yes, exactly. And some of the subject matter was sports, believe it or not, because my very first writing job was as a sports writer for the Washington Daily News, a paper that no longer exists, but it was a Scripps-Howard tabloid. And that's where I got my start as a writer. I was 19 years old, and I went in to the city editor with a cock-and-bull story about how much experience I had and that I was a real seasoned writer. He knew I was lying and was quite sure, but he hired me anyway. I remember I was overjoyed, I just couldn't believe he was going to give me a chance. He said, "You come back in tomorrow and we'll give it a try, we'll put you on -- we'll try you for 30 days" -- something like that -- "and see how it works out." So I remember going down to Brentano's and buying a book called Interpretative Reporting, since I didn't know anything about reporting. And I went down and read the goddamn thing overnight and came back the next day and gave it a whirl. And that's how I came to get on the sports desk. I covered the Washington Redskins, I covered boxing, high school athletics, and general sports news. Even though at the time, I wasn't all that interested in sports. I remember everything went well until one Sunday, they assigned me to cover a Redskins game (he laughs) and I happened to have a date for that afternoon with a girl that I much preferred to see than going to the Redskins game. So I stayed home and turned on the radio and covered it on the radio (Buck laughs) and he found out about it. His name was Garrett Waters, he was the sweetest man. But he found out about it somehow, and he called me in and just absolutely chewed my ass (Buck laughs) and nearly -- he said, "I should fire you, but I won't." They gave me another chance, and I worked there for a while. Then I quit and went to United Press International.

BUCK BUCK PENNINGTON: Was that where you stayed until '68?

GENE GENE DAVIS: Oh no, no. I jumped around a lot. I had a hell of a -- a lot of newspaper jobs. In fact, later I went to New York and got a job on the New York Times as a copy boy. In those days, to be a copy boy on the New York Times -- they were all Yale, Princeton, Harvard. It was a real elitist job to have, because it was a stepping stone to the reportorial. And I was a cub reporter there for a brief time, very brief. Also a copy boy. But I went to United Press and started there. They assigned me to the rewrite desk -- "overnight rewrite desk." Which meant that you come to work at 12 midnight and worked until eight in the morning and all you did was rewrite the day reports, always rewrites. It was a good training job. It'd teach you how to write, I'll tell you that.

BUCK PENNINGTON: This was in the early '50s?

GENE DAVIS: Oh no, this was in the '40s. And I had an old, grizzled veteran newspaper man with an eyeshade on and stuff to teach me. I learned a lot from that guy. His name was Shackleford [phon.sp.]. He later became a columnist with Scripps-Howard. And then -- I think I got fired from that job for some kind of indiscretion with some girl or something. They caught me in the stockroom with a girl (Buck: laughs) or something like that. I can't remember. Anyway, I got canned from that job. And then I went down to Fredericksburg, Virginia. I worked as a roving reporter on the Fredericksburg Freelance Star (Buck laughs) -- feature writer, and so on. I worked there for a while, had a great time. They let me do anything I wanted to do. Just go out and write my stories. I remember going in and pretending to be a customer of a fortune teller. I wouldn't let people know I was a reporter -- this kind of feature-writing. It was a lot of fun. Spent a night in jail, all kinds of things.

BUCK PENNINGTON: I can't help thinking that all of this tremendous imagination that you were using in your reporting years then bore even greater fruit when it came to your painting, because that imagination, when you were working as a professional you didn't enjoy that much, really reached a full expression when you got into your art work. Especially maybe in your early years especially -- did you see it that way? When you first started to really paint, was it a great outlet for you, a great breakthrough?

GENE DAVIS: Oh yes, tremendous. Like I'd come home. I think if I had given it a whirl, instead of being a journalist, I probably would have been a better fiction writer. I never did really give it a chance. Because

journalism, after a while, gets to be rather routine --

BUCK PENNINGTON: Almost hack-like.

GENE DAVIS: Yes, exactly. It doesn't call really upon the imagination, unless you happen to be a girl I knew, "The Story of Jimmy." (Buck laughs)

BUCK PENNINGTON: (laughing) Janet Cooke for the Post.

GENE DAVIS: Yes.

BUCK PENNINGTON: So then when you started painting, you were looking at paintings at the Phillips and you were spending some time with Jacob Kainen and working with him, and he was --

GENE DAVIS: Well, I wasn't working with him. I've never studied with anybody formally, but I must say I regarded him for a long time as a mentor, because we would see each other socially. And I used to pick his brain all the time. I saw his work here in one of the museums -- the Corcoran Area Show or something like that. I called him up and asked him to get together and he graciously agreed and we became fast friends, still are. For a long time, many, many times we would get together once a week and he'd come over to my studio. He was very generous with his time, and I'd show him my latest work. He was very encouraging. That meant a hell of a lot to me, because I had no real confidence in myself. The idea that here's a professional artist, whose opinion I respect, who says these efforts of mine are good -- he gave me a great deal. In fact, he wrote the catalog for my very, very first one-man show, which was in the lobby of the Dupont Theater -- the same theater's still there.

BUCK PENNINGTON: Dupont Circle.

GENE DAVIS: South of Dupont Circle. That was the place where young avant-garde artists showed in the '50s. There wasn't any other place except the White Gallery and Bookshop up on Connecticut Avenue north of the Circle -- and Franz Bader was the manager of that bookstore. And he was the one that was largely responsible for showing Capitol Art Shows. But if you wanted to show any place else, the Dupont Theater was the place. And Kainen wrote the catalog. It was a drawings show, black and white drawings, believe it or not, on paper. And we had a formal opening, the critics all reviewed the shows there, and everything. There were two places to show in Washington.

BUCK PENNINGTON: This would have been -- one of the things that I've been doing --

GENE DAVIS: This was 1952.

BUCK PENNINGTON: '52... One of the things that I've been doing in the last month is investigating and researching the art situation especially as regards exhibitions in Washington in the early '50s in this whole McCarthy climate, and the whole climate of repression. I've talked to Anne Marie Pope and to Lois Bingham about artists that couldn't be included in shows because they had communist leanings or associations. There was the whole feeling that art was something that was existing almost in opposition to the government. So I can't imagine that the Washington climate in the early '50s was a very encouraging one for artists. There was no art community as such, was there?

GENE DAVIS: A small one. It was mainly centered around American University, the group out there. Are you familiar with that group -- Joe Summerford, Bob Gates, Calfee? Well, they were the big wheels in the Washington art scene in those days, but I don't think that politics had any bearing whatsoever -- politics was never even a consideration for me -- I don't think it was for them either.

BUCK PENNINGTON: But there was no place to show, so there was very little interest in this community.

GENE DAVIS: Quite true. And the big place to show every years was the Corcoran Area Show. That was what we all shot for -- you're showing in a museum, wow. I was fortunate enough to get a drawing included in the Corcoran Area Show, I think in 1953. And that was one of the biggest thrills I've ever had. Before or since.

BUCK PENNINGTON: It was a big breakthrough for you.

GENE DAVIS: Oh yes. But in those days the Corcoran gave local artists a big break because they had this show every year. Anybody could submit. So if you got in there, it was kind of a test.

BUCK PENNINGTON: So by 1954, let's say, you were painting on a pretty intense regular basis.

GENE DAVIS: Yes, that's right. At that time, though, I was doing a full-time job, you know, but the intensity was there. I was really hooked on art.

BUCK PENNINGTON: Did you consider yourself an abstractionist in those days?

GENE DAVIS: I've been an abstractionist from the beginning -- which is unusual. I've never been a realist artist. So I have -- I've had no formal training. I haven't studied from the model. I haven't gone through the usual classical training at all. I just bypassed that entire issue. And I'm not sorry. My art doesn't really require it. I'm a little unusual in that regard, because most artists who are as well known as I am have got all the credentials, not to speak of an M.F.A. or some thing like that. Or at least they've got formal training. I don't have any formal training.

BUCK PENNINGTON: Well, in some ways, though, that's a very American phenomenon, because oftentimes we tend to produce genius in this country --

GENE DAVIS: I'm self-taught --

BUCK PENNINGTON: Joseph Cornell.

GENE DAVIS: Yes, exactly. I understand -- I can't prove it -- but I understand that Frank Stella also has never had a realistic period.

BUCK PENNINGTON: This may sort of sound a bit academic, but I think about it a lot and I wonder about what abstraction means to you. Does it merely mean distilling, or does it mean self-expression? And what does abstract expression mean?

GENE DAVIS: Well, you've got to put it in proper context. When I first jumped into the art stream, in 1949 -- fall of 1949 I started -- after having read an article in the New York Times about Van Gogh that turned me on. In those days, the big issue was whether you were going to be a realist or an abstractionist. And to be an abstractionist per se in those days meant you were avant-garde. Because that was the issue. Realism versus abstraction. Abstraction per se was more advanced than realism. Just to be an abstractionist in those days was an act of some daring. So I just started out -- I leaped right in as an abstractionist. Because I could see that -- those were the days when Life Magazine was running color photographs of Jackson Pollock's wild works. I looked at those things and thought, "Shit, man, I can do that." What really impressed me about the Abstract Expressionists was the degree to which you could de-emphasize skill and still say something that had tremendous intensity. The amount of skill required to produce a Jackson Pollock -- I don't care what anybody says -- is minimal. It's the "what" of it more than the "how" of it, even though he does have some good ones and some bad ones. Any skilled person can get Duco paint and drip a pretty attractive painting. It's the "what" of it, not the "how" of it, that's important.

BUCK PENNINGTON: The existence of it --

GENE DAVIS: The mere fact that he had the audacity to drip paint on a canvas and show it as fine art is his importance, not how well he dripped it. The fact that he did it at all. So, in that climate of thinking, in that kind of attitude, I thought, "Jesus, why should I go and study still lifes and do models and so on? I want to jump right in with the most avant-garde work of the time." Which I did. And you look at Franz Kline and -- god, those big old things look like they were, you know, painted on a back fence. I'm over-simplifying this, obviously, because skill is involved. But...

BUCK PENNINGTON: But it's energy, too.

GENE DAVIS: It's energy, and it's -- yes, energy's the right word. Intensity.

BUCK PENNINGTON: I wonder what you think -- there's a question for another academic context -- I wonder what you think about the argument that was raised then, and it's beginning to be raised again now, that abstraction breaks down culture and that realism affirms culture. And that the big controversy over abstraction in the '50s was that it didn't mean anything, it was a negative art, and it made no cultural contribution.

GENE DAVIS: That's what I would call a dumb, dumb (Buck laughs) academic issue. First of all, abstraction in art is not "real" at all. Look at Islamic art, look at many of the ancient art forms -- some of the most beautiful stuff is totally and utterly abstract. So it's not a real issue at all. It's a matter of emphasis. I don't really care about the sociological issues of art. I leave that to the professors and so on. My attitude is that both abstract art and realistic art can be great. It depends on who's doing it. Of and in itself, realism or abstraction doesn't have any virtues. (laughs) It's which abstractionist you're talking about, or which realist. Some of the worst art I know is realistic, and some of the worst art I know abstract. And vice versa.

BUCK PENNINGTON: What do you think about the argument that the Abstract Expressionist movement if the greatest American art movement, is the greatest American expression? Does that mean anything to you, or --

GENE DAVIS: I can see how you could develop a pretty good case for it, in that it was breakthrough art, and that it was the first time -- the very first time -- that American art was regarded as other than provincial. That is to say, 19th century American art may be good but it's provincial art; it wasn't international in scope. Certainly Thomas Cole, good as he is, and -- what's the guy's name, paints Grand Canyon and --

BUCK PENNINGTON: Church.

GENE DAVIS: Church -- that whole group -- Moran and Caleb Bingham and all those people are marvelous artists, even Thomas Eakins. But their art did not have international implications. For the very first time, you get Jackson Pollock -- especially Jackson Pollock -- and people like Clyfford Still, Barnett Newman. These people set off sparks that changed art around the world. If you want to look at it from that viewpoint, it may well be the most important movement. But there's an awful lot of good art that's been produced since. I think that you could make some pretty extravagant claims for Pop Art. That produced a revolution. And then there's all these other movements -- Color Field painting, which I'm often mistakenly identified with.

BUCK PENNINGTON: But do you believe that there's a good argument to be made as well that abstraction can be international, it can have an international appeal because it isn't a realist subject matter. There's not a concrete item there for you to respond to, either negatively or positively. And perhaps you're interested in an American genre field, and, you know, sunset over the Grand Canyon, and perhaps you're not. Whereas an abstract painting can be responded to by different peoples and different cultures everywhere.

GENE DAVIS: Well, it's a little bit like music in being international.

BUCK PENNINGTON: You said somewhere, I was reading, that you have a reluctance to be bossed or instructed; that you're a pretty free operator. So that would fit into this interest in the abstract, wouldn't it? In that if you weren't interested in being instructed in the realist tradition, you would break your own ground? And find your own abstract way of expressing your art?

GENE DAVIS: I never thought of it that way. Doesn't mean you don't.

BUCK PENNINGTON: One of the things I was wondering about and that I wrote down is that before, you were describing to me, you showed me some of the photography that you've done that had an S and M motif, a bondage motif, one of the photographs that you published. And I wonder if you could explain that to me, how that came about, how that interest evolved.

GENE DAVIS: From the very beginning, I've always felt that the area of the seemingly outrageous, the ridiculous, is the best area to be in for art. At least at its inception when starting out. Because there is a precedent for that. I mean, most art, on first confrontation -- at least generally important art in the last 150 years on first confrontation, art seems to be ridiculous. I don't know how well you're versed in the current New York art scene, people like Vito Acconci.

BUCK PENNINGTON: That I don't know.

GENE DAVIS: In most of the art -- what could have been more ridiculous in 1949 than a guy who pours paint all over a canvas? Well it turns out to have vast implications.

BUCK PENNINGTON: And now with the [inaudible], what can be more ridiculous than...

GENE DAVIS: And that's where all the energy is. That's what excites me anyway. That seems the newest stuff that's around. So, some of that interest in very blatant sexual content has that background -- the idea of trying to almost be outrageous or ridiculous. It's almost a conscious thing. It's something, you know, that shakes them up. It's not a painting of a bouquet of flowers.

BUCK PENNINGTON: To shock or offend?

GENE DAVIS: Yes, somewhat. Also, to create ambiguity. Because -- I'll show you some of my recent drawings, if you're interested. [inaudible] stripes, collages, strong sexual content. But they're very lyrical in their content, also. So it's a little bit like Mozart, who was a master of ambiguity, in that his works can often be regarded as little tinkling, felicitous things, but there's a strong note of melancholy running throughout. You get that melancholy plus felicity and it creates ambiguity. But if you paint a very pretty picture, with pretty colors in it, and it's got some woman all tied up, showing a lot of erect penises or something like that -- it interests me, that subject interest me. Not the penises, but ambiguity interests me. So, I like this confrontation of opposites in a work. And generally when I see it in somebody else's work also.

BUCK PENNINGTON: Confrontation of opposites fits in with traditional heterosexual sexual models, since man is one thing, and woman is another. So there's that confrontation. When you say "ambiguity," that almost relates

to abstractions -- non-real, non-identified.

GENE DAVIS: Well, you've got to clarify your terms. "Abstraction" connotes abstraction from reality, abstracting from something. I am basically -- I guess the way the critics would categorize me -- a non-objective, a non-realist, a non-objective. "Abstraction" connotes there's some relationship to reality. But I don't regard myself an abstractionist or a non-objective artist. I have very, very strong subject matter in my work, which is stripes. A stripe is just as real as a goddamn flower --

BUCK PENNINGTON: Indeed.

GENE DAVIS: -- if you can invest it with enough intensity. Which is what I try to do in my work.

BUCK PENNINGTON: In a technical sense, it is formal. It's a formal form, a stripe is. It has a real image.

[interruption]

BUCK PENNINGTON: You were talking about ambiguity, and your feelings about that relationship. I was wondering -- one of the things I wrote down was, in regards to this interest, and when I saw those photographs, the are very strong photographs, they are very powerful images, and I was wondering how you feel about role. Or maybe that's something not important to you, but do you feel that a strong sexual identity is important to you and in your art? I mean, do you feel strongly identified as a man, in opposition to a woman? Or do you feel androgynous, does that carry over into your --

GENE DAVIS: It's something that doesn't really interest me very much. I take it for granted that I'm a man, and that my work has balls. But the feminist movement is changing a lot of stereotypes. And some of the people -- I just curated a show at W.P.A. [Washington Project for the Arts] and -- I don't remember the exact ratio -- but at least a third of them were women. Some of them were damn tough artists.

BUCK PENNINGTON: Well, Joan Mitchell is a very tough woman artist.

GENE DAVIS: She's a tough woman PERIOD.

BUCK PENNINGTON: And so is Lila Katzen. They're both women who, in a way, have adopted male forms. I mean, Lila Katzen's enormous, heavy statues and sculpture work is a fierce thing to deal with.

GENE DAVIS: On the other hand, somebody like Helen Frankenthaler is a little more feminine. At least, I find her so. But I don't know, Mary Miss and Alice Aycock, who are new young sculptor-architects, whatever we should call them, they're really radical young artists. I met Alice Aycock at Joan Mondale's a year or so ago. I couldn't believe it -- she looked like Little Orphan Annie. She's one of these cute little blond things and does these enormous goddamn masculine-looking works. It doesn't look like -- I don't put the two together. How it could come from such a little feminine girl.

BUCK PENNINGTON: One of your paintings -- still on the same thing -- one of your paintings that I saw that really intrigued me was the one you did at the Corcoran that was so large that was called Satan's Flag.

GENE DAVIS: Oh yes, the big black one.

BUCK PENNINGTON: How did you choose upon that as the title, as a subject? Was it because it was black?

GENE DAVIS: Yes. If you've gone through any of my titles, you'll know that I have a lot of fun with my titles.

BUCK PENNINGTON: Yes.

GENE DAVIS: That's my literary bent coming out, I guess. Some people think my titles are more interesting than my work. (Bucklaughs) I resent that!

BUCK PENNINGTON: I don't blame you.

GENE DAVIS: But -- I can see somebody, one day, doing a Master's thesis on the titles of my work.

BUCK PENNINGTON: Well, there is an interesting correlation between your work and --

GENE DAVIS: Well, I'll tell you. The only other artist who -- I'll say this really modestly -- the only artist who does as interesting titles as me is Paul Klee, who titles his work such things as The Twittering Machine and lovely titles like that. I was very influenced -- Klee was my very first love. And the idea of putting ambiguous titles on paintings came from my first inspiration from Paul Klee. The Phillips Gallery, of course, has a whole room of his works and I've been looking at them for years.

BUCK PENNINGTON: Is he still a strong favorite of yours?

GENE DAVIS: Yes. Sure is. He's a little bit too much in a minor key for me right at the moment, but no, his influence is indelible. I can tell you a little episode. I had this painting called Junkie's Curtain down at the Corcoran. It used to hang in the lobby, for a long, long period of time. And they took a tour of young ghetto kids through there one day, and they were really -- not to make a pun, but -- turned on by my painting. And the thing that really appealed to them most was the title. They went over and looked at it: Junkie's Curtain. They went back and somehow the painting -- according to the woman who conducted the tour, all of a sudden the painting had special meaning for them. Which was rather interesting.

BUCK PENNINGTON: Because it was something they could relate to. The comment that you made that I thought that related to that was that, in the interview with Donald Wall, you said that really good art is challenging on a formal level and not on a literary level.

GENE DAVIS: Well, there are people who would obviously argue that with me. I'm a formalist, because I put -- it's a matter of emphasis. There's no such thing as a painting about nothing. So my work puts the emphasis on the formalistic aspects of it. And I know that I was of the Old Master, despite the very heavy literary content, if it doesn't have more than that -- if the form of it doesn't interest me -- the form of the Crucifixion, or the Pieta, doesn't interest me, then the subject matter isn't going to carry the work at all. For example, if you look at 17th century Dutch art, you'll see that there are endless numbers of painters who painted exactly the same subject matter as Rembrandt -- these Dutch middle-class people with their big hats and their long collars and all that. So, Rembrandt's great, and most of those people are eminently forgettable. What makes the difference? It isn't the subject matter, obviously. It's the form. The subject matter is, you know, less.

BUCK PENNINGTON: So the stripe has a formal aspect?

GENE DAVIS: Oh, very much so.

BUCK PENNINGTON: And a bond aspect, too.

GENE DAVIS: A what?

BUCK PENNINGTON: A bondage aspect, almost. The stripes are bonding the canvas. If you conceive of the canvas as this space.

GENE DAVIS: I think you're reaching for something. (Bucklaughs)

[interruption]

BUCK PENNINGTON: I'll ask you to respond to Wall's comment that the stripe, for you, has the quality of being an obsession, almost a fanaticism. That was his comment. And I notice that you sort of let him get away with that in this interview. Do you really feel that you're fanatic about it?

GENE DAVIS: If you paint stripes for 20 years, it goes with saying, doesn't it?

BUCK PENNINGTON: Well, rehash for me, then, just a little bit, or for us --

GENE DAVIS: Here's the first stripe thing I ever painted, in 1958. It's called Peach Glow, and it's nothing but a white -- it's on raw canvas and it's a pink and white alternating pin stripe going all the way across edge to edge and done by hand.

BUCK PENNINGTON: No line-ing, no masking on this?

GENE DAVIS: No. I just did it by eye.

BUCK PENNINGTON: And this was your first -- how did you -- what motivated you towards this? This expression?

GENE DAVIS: [inaudible] Uh... Well, in the climate of 1957, '58, Abstract Expressionism and painterly abstraction were dominating everything. All the art departments -- college art departments -- were grinding out little de Koonings and Pollocks and Klines and so on. So, in that climate, it seemed like Abstract Expressionism was academic, and there was no place to go. It had already been used up. And you had to go somewhere. So the very opposite place to go, obviously, was to get away from painterliness and be neat. And I like to say that. There's no more profound reason than that, but that's the way I was thinking then. "Let's see if I can't do something that goes in the opposite direction from painterly abstraction." So I just set out on -- more a lark, I think. I just decided to do a stripe painting, just to be outrageous. Of course, three years later, Clement Greenberg curated this very famous historic show called "Post-Painterly Abstraction," which I fitted into like a glove and he included three of my works in it. I was just one of a number of people that were beginning to feel

that this was used up, this painterly abstraction was used up and we had to move somewhere else. And we all sort of -- Frank Stella, Noland, myself. There's a whole group of them -- Ellsworth Kelly -- well, Ellsworth Kelly has always been an immaculate painter, but he was included in Greenberg's show.

BUCK PENNINGTON: So then, once you seized upon this, you were -- that was it for you, that was your form.

GENE DAVIS: Somehow it felt right and of course, I began to get a lot of encouragement in those days. There was an article in Art International about the new young color painters, and --

BUCK PENNINGTON: Did you consider yourself a color painter at the time?

GENE DAVIS: Well, you know, you leave that to critics, to put names on, labels, you don't have to label everything. It never occurred to me, no. It came later. Somebody began to see that there was a group of Washington artists all kind of emphasizing color and abstraction. I don't know who the hell put that label on us.

BUCK PENNINGTON: So, by the late '50s, there was a new emerging art community in Washington? Something different than the old A.U. school.

GENE DAVIS: Oh yes. The A.U. school was provincial, and this school was national. This was the first art movement in Washington that had national implications, because it did. The Washington color community did influence art of the '60s, without a doubt. It certainly influenced Stella's work. Stella [inaudible] underlying critic that never occurred to him to write that. But it came right out of Washington color painting. The idea of bands of color, hard-edged, bright color. It was like a breath of fresh air in the early '60s, because all this messy shit, you know, that was going on in New York -- we provided an alternative.

BUCK PENNINGTON: Sort of cleaned up the act, as it were.

GENE DAVIS: Something like that, yes.

BUCK PENNINGTON: This bright color must have been a real beacon for the Pop artists, too.

GENE DAVIS: Yes -- well, certain things were in the air. I'd be the last person in the world to claim Washington's art influenced Pop Art, but I think things were in the air. And they had bright, brazen colors just like we did. There was something, a common denominator that went through the '60s. It was an exciting period. The Kennedy era, optimism was in the air, excitement, campus rebellion -- all that stuff was all -- you can't isolate any of it.

BUCK PENNINGTON: You know, in some ways, this painting that you say was your first here, and the things that I've seen of yours recently, seem to have a tremendous amount in common, as opposed to the early to mid-'60s stuff that I've seen. There's such a sharper color focus.

GENE DAVIS: If you look at about 1962 -- this is 1958 -- that's quite true, I went into this very bright period. Then, in the '70s, I began to pull back and pick up on some of my '50s more subtle stuff. I've come full circle.

BUCK PENNINGTON: The color interests you greatly.

GENE DAVIS: Oh, yes.

BUCK PENNINGTON: You mention, in one place that I've read, you mention that color and interval were what really appeared to you --

GENE DAVIS: Interval almost more than color.

BUCK PENNINGTON: What does that mean, "interval"?

GENE DAVIS: The distance between things. Like in music. Music is an art of sound interval, time interval, and painting -- my painting -- is an art of space intervals. One is time, one is space.

BUCK PENNINGTON: And the space is a question of the breadth of a line? Or the distance between the colors, or the interaction of the color?

GENE DAVIS: All three. In other words, if you have a painting which has all half-inch stripes in it, multi-color, and you put a bright red over here, and another bright red over there, [inaudible], no more of those bright reds in the entire painting, there's an interval established between the two reds. Because all the other colors in the painting will be something else. But these two reds relate. See those two yellows?

BUCK PENNINGTON: Yes.

GENE DAVIS: The same yellow, so they relate. The others don't necessarily. So there's an interval. The interval between those two yellows is the blue -- the space [inaudible] if it's a space interval.

BUCK PENNINGTON: That picture has both an optic and a kinetic effect for me, though, because --

GENE DAVIS: It's also very architectural.

BUCK PENNINGTON: Yes.

GENE DAVIS: It throws the whole room askew.

BUCK PENNINGTON: The bonds themselves are on a slant, and the painting is hung at a slant, and I can't quite focus because of the intensity of the color, as to whether or not it is a rhombus or whether or not it is an elongated rectangle.

GENE DAVIS: Well, it actually a slice out of vertical stripe painting.

[This is additional part of Gene Davis interview tape, to be added to portion transcribed some years earlier.]

[Transcriber's note: A persistent rather loud hum accompanied the recording, militating against clear sound and obscuring some.]

BUCK PENNINGTON: I just wanted to ask you a few more questions about color itself and how you choose your color and how color interests you. You don't mix your colors, do you?

GENE DAVIS: Oh sure. Almost always. In the mid-60s I used to paint pictures in which colors came right out of the tube but that was for a period of maybe four or five years. I haven't done that since, I've never used colors out of the tube (inaudible) years.

BUCK PENNINGTON: So then in a technical sense do you try to prepare enough color to sustain that one tone throughout the whole picture that you're doing? Or do you just keep mixing?

GENE DAVIS: Both, both. There's no formula that I use.

BUCK PENNINGTON: And you don't use a formula either for the color -- you don't say there's going to be a red line every --

GENE DAVIS: Oh no, I'm the most intuitive of painters in my selection of color, my selection of interval, my selection of format, my selection of size. Really, I'm a real shoot-from-the-hip artist in spite of the fact that to look at my style, one might think that I was a very kind of analytical, mathematical type mind. Not at all.Intuitive, you see, drawing, there is this other side to me which is --

BUCK PENNINGTON: What colors do appeal to you?

GENE DAVIS: All colors!

BUCK PENNINGTON: In these drawings, what are you trying to do?

GENE DAVIS: Paint something, draw something interesting.

BUCK PENNINGTON: In some of them you've used your stripes, your basic style, over which you superimpose other images, cutout images that have a collage effect, a random effect, with strong sexual connotations.

GENE DAVIS: In some of them, yes.

BUCK PENNINGTON: Is that for the shock effect? Or --

GENE DAVIS: It somewhat comes out of my unconscious, I think. (inaudible phrase)

BUCK PENNINGTON: Are these fairly spontaneous, done very quickly? Or a theory that you're sustaining?

GENE DAVIS: I'm a quick

BUCK PENNINGTON: This is amazing, the one with the body and the striping and all the eyes. Did you cut these to go with the magazine thing?

GENE DAVIS: Yes. They go back to a series of collages that I did in 1958 in which I did the same thing. These are not new at all, they're recent, but they pick up on a whole group of very sexually oriented collages that I did in

1958, which I can show you downstairs.

BUCK PENNINGTON: (after a pause) Oh, these are all 1980.

GENE DAVIS: Yes, they're all recent, every one.

BUCK PENNINGTON: How often do you work in this range, as opposed to being in your studio, changing, working on a painting? Is this a relief for you from that?

GENE DAVIS: Yes, to some degree. Because painting stripe paintings is a vigorous kind of thing, I've got at least to be down on my hands and knees .

BUCK PENNINGTON: What is the medium you're using here, crayon and pencil?

GENE DAVIS: Yes.

BUCK PENNINGTON: And cutouts.

GENE DAVIS: Yes, cutouts.

BUCK PENNINGTON: Are you painting on ?

GENE DAVIS: Yes. . I don't know whether I came to it through Paul Klee or whether I had it naturally but I am very, very influenced by children's art. I like children's art almost as much as I like any other art in the world. It's expressive and it lacks slickness and I try to achieve some of that in my own drawing.

BUCK PENNINGTON: In these bondage things you admit the heavy color tonality of this particular scene of a woman trussed up with a color where you emphasized and brought out that color.

GENE DAVIS: Yes. And it's also got a little gentle pussycat over on the lefthand side which creates a certain element of ambiguity in the work.

BUCK PENNINGTON: What does this image do for you, this trussed image?

GENE DAVIS: Same thing it means to you, probably.

BUCK PENNINGTON: (laughing) What it means to me? I have very ambiguous feelings about it, because I'm about that picture, myself.

GENE DAVIS: Well, I just find it -- it's kind of taboo subject matter; let's put it that way.

BUCK PENNINGTON: But I don't think it's as taboo as it once was.

GENE DAVIS: No. It's the in-thing in New York.

BUCK PENNINGTON: It's a very large part of punk art, is bondage.

GENE DAVIS: And that's nominal.

BUCK PENNINGTON: And pain -- almost as though there's some relationship between pain and, well, the whole pleasure-pain syndrome in art expression. That's very disturbing to me, because I feel that it's negative. It's NOT good energy. I feel that obstruction. Stripes as you explain them to me are intense images. I went down and looked at your picture at NCFA [later: National Museum of American Art] yesterday for about a half-hour in the lobby --

GENE DAVIS: There's one on the second floor.

BUCK PENNINGTON: Yes, and there's one in the first floor lobby on that wall there, and I looked at that painting for a long time and it finally became optical for me -- it started to literally come off the wall for me after a while. I was strongly drawn, first, to the color. Then the longer I looked at the color the deeper I responded to the form. And I was how that color lined up so neatly. And I began to feel almost as though I was seeing each color by itself, and yet in a context. It did strongly appeal to me. " I will not make any more boring art." (he laughs) You have that on one of your collages. This almost has a musical quality, too.

GENE DAVIS: I'm a frustrated musician. I studied the trumpet all through my teens. Didn't really have enough talent, although music is something I --

BUCK PENNINGTON: In all the various positions and there's a maze-like quality in the connected dots. Shoes and

dogs and lots of cats predominated. And this rounded shape, is that a penis shape, this rounded shape?

GENE DAVIS: Let people make their own interpretation. No, it was not intended that way at all.

BUCK PENNINGTON: It's like George O'Keeffe, she always says that about her very vaginal --

GENE DAVIS: Well, I'm sure it's quite true. Something gets into your work, it's not (inaudible phrase)

BUCK PENNINGTON: How long did you expend on these? I didn't know whether might have very quickly or whether others you worked on for a good time, coloring. more stripes.

GENE DAVIS: You're right.

BUCK PENNINGTON: (a sentence; can't get)

GENE DAVIS: Any time -- it's obedient work, it's uninteresting.

BUCK PENNINGTON: So then, you've sort of been trapped, in a way.

GENE DAVIS: Well, that's how stripe painting .

BUCK PENNINGTON: But you would sell them.

GENE DAVIS: Yes. It's a funny thing but I have a block about selling them. I'd much rather sell my stripe paintings than these. I don't quite know why that should be. (inaudible sentence) It just seems they're like stealing my children.

BUCK PENNINGTON: You feel more deeply about these than you do about the stripes. Have you had stripe paintings commissioned?

GENE DAVIS: Some. Many.

BUCK PENNINGTON: What did the commissions involve? Did they say to you "I want so many stripes and so many colors?"

GENE DAVIS: Nobody but interior decorators. (Pennington laughs) No: (inaudible phrase)

BUCK PENNINGTON: I like drawing best of all. A painting is something frozen in time but for me a drawing is the artist at his most fluid, his most active

GENE DAVIS: Most revealing.

BUCK PENNINGTON: -- and most revealing. They are like a journal. I never paint but I draw every day, I try to draw every day.

GENE DAVIS: I didn't know you're an artist.

BUCK PENNINGTON: I'm not very good but I try to draw, because I feel it's almost impossible to really see art, it's your job to look at art, I think it's almost impossible to see it if you're not working with your hand all the time as well --

GENE DAVIS: That's a good thing to do.

BUCK PENNINGTON: -- relationship between the hand and the eye in understanding painting is essential, and line and everything in drawing is essential. There's a strong sense of line --

GENE DAVIS: (with a short laugh) Oh, that comes as a surprise to me.

BUCK PENNINGTON: -- in almost everything. (moving further away, perhaps studying a painting, inaudible sentence; then resuming louder) Have you been drawing all along?

GENE DAVIS: My first show was a drawing show.

BUCK PENNINGTON: Do you usually do a drawing for stripe paintings that you do?

GENE DAVIS: I've never done a study for a stripe painting in my life. I just start out and start painting.

BUCK PENNINGTON: Well, of course you know what size it's going to be.

GENE DAVIS: I have a preconceived notion of what I'd like it to sort of look like but I'm often surprised as hell when, you know, when it doesn't turn out right.

BUCK PENNINGTON: I also wanted you to just briefly talk to me about some of the projects in which you've been involved, if you would, in Philadelphia; the Rose, for example; how did that come to be?

GENE DAVIS: David Katzie (he spells it) who used to be director of Urban Outreach, it's called, at the Philadelphia Museum, contacted me about doing a piece for Philadelphia; he was at the Museum then, he'd seen a number of my shows and he liked my micro-paintings -- these were little tiny micro-paintings and he liked them. He wanted to know if it would be possible to do a show in which we utilized micro-paintings all over the city of Philadelphia.

I got thinking about and somehow it just didn't make all that much sense to me. So we got to talking about things, and somehow -- I don't know who came up with the idea first -- it might be an idea to go in the opposite direction and do a huge work on the street. We settled on this area directly in front of the Philadelphia Museum of Art. A major part of the effort that went into that thing was trying to get officialdom to approve it, all the politicians and City Hall and all that. We finally got that, and I did a study for it. Then we got the help of students and believe it or not, some of the Philadelphia street gangs -- real ghetto-type gangs, you know. They all pitched in and executed it that way.

We painted with epoxy paint on macadam. When it was first painted, it was featured in a center fold in Life magazine and got an awful lot of --

BUCK PENNINGTON: How long was it?

GENE DAVIS: I can't remember the exact length of it -- (reflecting) It seems to me it was something like --

BUCK PENNINGTON: Two or three blocks, though.

GENE DAVIS: Yes; a long, long painting, and it was as wide as a wide street. It was a spectacular work. In fact, I think probably that Philadelphia painting, which incidentally was called "Franklin's Footpad," got me more attention than anything I've done before or since. It's a real craft and it was published in an endless number of art books and magazines and popular press and so on.

BUCK PENNINGTON: In some ways it was sort ahead of expressions, including things like Christo was doing -- environmental art, to an extent.

GENE DAVIS: I'm not sure -- I wouldn't want to make that claim for it. I think probably Christo was doing some of his things contemporaneously with this --

BUCK PENNINGTON: Large outdoor --

GENE DAVIS: Yes. Smithson was certainly doing some of his pieces outdoors. It was very much in the air then and my work was very compatible with that kind of thinking.

BUCK PENNINGTON: Taking art out of the museum and putting it in an environment where it could be seen by people.

GENE DAVIS: Yes.

BUCK PENNINGTON: What about the grass painting at the Kennedy Center project?

GENE DAVIS: That was a great little idea but we couldn't raise the money for the thing. The best I could do was just do a little drawing diagraming it. That was shown in the exhibition, that's the closest we got to executing that.

BUCK PENNINGTON: Would it actually have been on the grass itself?

GENE DAVIS: Yes. In fact, when I first conceived it was more of a conceptual piece and I eliminated that from it. Unfortunately, I probably should have left it in. It originally called for us to use the kind of paint they use to paint the grass on end zones of football fields, a special kind of dye that doesn't harm the grass. We were going to paint this thing on the grass, a circular grass plot; and get it all done, then let the grass grow for a week. And then the piece called for each stripe to be mowed and save the grass clippings, carefully put them in bags, each stripe, separating the colors. Then go way across the city somewhere on a parking lot and reassemble the entire work with the grass clippings, lining it all up and spreading the grass clippings all out: redoing the work somewhere else.

BUCK PENNINGTON: Amazing.

GENE DAVIS: And that was my piece. I'm getting this on the record for the first time. But I wrote that all up. I don't know why I abbreviated it later. But I thought it was a marvelous little piece of visual poetry in that big common you had to do it on when it was not windy.

BUCK PENNINGTON: So it's a real piece of conceptual art.

GENE DAVIS: That was a real piece of conceptual art.

BUCK PENNINGTON: You know, there's now talk in the air about "post-conceptualism" --

GENE DAVIS: Well, conceptual art now is out the window. I associate it with 1968 to 1972, that period.

BUCK PENNINGTON: Thought: almost pure thought.

GENE DAVIS: Yes. " ," that's a synonym for it.

BUCK PENNINGTON: One of the things I was going to ask you was about the micro-paintings, how they came to be.

GENE DAVIS: Well, the same kind of thinking that produced my stripe paintings also produced my micro-paintings. The idea of going against the grain, against prevailing ideology. In 1966, which was when I did my first micro-painting, everybody was doing huge works, they were cliches -- all these enormous color field paintings were all over the place. I was doing big, big work at the National Collection [of Fine Arts], "Raspberry Icicle," a 20-foot painting. That's what I was doing then, I equated that with quality, bigness with quality.

I got to thinking, gee, this is getting to be academic, it's like some of the studio machines they used to paint in the 19th century -- in order to submit this great big -- like Meissonier's "Napoleon's Retreat from Moscow" and all that; the bigger it is, the more dazzling it is. And I thought, why not go in the opposite direction? It's thinking just that simple that produced the micro-paintings. I thought, why not emphasize diminutive scale rather than large scale and see what you can come up with?

So I started out -- well, what I wanted to do -- so I started out with -- in some ways they're the most energetic of all the micro-paintings I ever did, and I did them for four or five years: plain little stretched canvases, one flat color each -- a blue one, a red one, a green one, a yellow one; a single color, . They were stretched on a piece of wood and painted one flat color. I had my first show of those in 1967 at Jefferson Place Gallery, and I treated them very environmentally, architecturally, in that I put a red one up on the ceiling, then a green one down the center of a wall, so that your eye would make the connection between the red one and the green one; you'd see this and you'd see that interval again. They were like little weeping things happening -- I'll never forget, they created a sensation in Washington, I remember Rockne Krebs came over and just actually flipped out over the paintings, and everybody did; just aghast at these things. There were no radicals arts in 1967.

I'll never forget, I spent one whole Sunday at the Jefferson Place Gallery by myself. I didn't know what the hell I was doing, laying out, you know, you generally hang paintings on the wall. So I went there all by myself. I remember Nesta Dorrance was the director of the Jefferson Place Gallery and she let me go down all by myself and stay by myself in the gallery all one Sunday. I had a big shoebox full of these little paintings and I just kept scrambling around until I got them -- I've got photographs of the installation, fortunately.

And finally kind of interesting , put three or four of them along the baseboard, put them in unexpected places, up in a corner of the ceiling --

BUCK PENNINGTON: Almost like a modar effect.

GENE DAVIS: Something like that, yes, but they were environmental and architectural, they made you sense the dimensions of the room in a way that conventional painting would not do. It was really radical work. They were shown later in London and Zurich and New York, Chicago, Milwaukee, all over the place.

BUCK PENNINGTON: Do you still have some?

GENE DAVIS: over here.

BUCK PENNINGTON: You didn't sell them?

GENE DAVIS: People used to want to buy them from me and I felt ridiculous charging them, I'd rather keep them than sell them to somebody for some ridiculously low price. To tell somebody "I want $700" for a little laugh at them. I decided to keep them, in other words.

BUCK PENNINGTON: One more project I wanted to ask you about: the painting in the rotunda at the Corcoran.

That sounds like a very because it was in the round. Is that the only painting you've ever done in the round?

GENE DAVIS: Yes, it is. Roy Slade, the then director of the Corcoran, asked me if I'd like to take a whack at doing something on that wall. Naturally, a challenge. It was a rather unusual painting I must say, because it so happened that there is a marble statue, a nude, right in the middle of that room, and I wanted that statue removed because it became a two-sided project, where the two walls were kind of communicating with each other. To have a Hiram Powers' "Greek Slave" in the middle of the gallery struck me as kind of an infringement on my piece and Roy promised faithfully to remove it.

As it turned out, the thing was so heavy that it would have required some kind of special equipment in there to move the thing, not to speak of the fact that it might have been damaged. So after a long negotiation we finally decided to leave it. It became kind of an interesting part of the piece. Looking at photographs of it later, I found it charming to see this gleaming white figure in there against all this color. In that respect I didn't mind it too badly. And it got a lot of attention too, a little environmental piece.

I did another one recently at Cranbrook. There's the model for it right there. It also involved two walls inter-reacting to each other in the same way that the rotunda painting did, except in this one the space is rectilinear.

BUCK PENNINGTON: But you created the whole room.

GENE DAVIS: Yes, the entire room. It's far larger than the rotunda, this gallery is 120 feet long, the ceilings are 15 feet high, so this is an enormous environmental piece. One wall is all black with gray stripes, the other was dark, dark blue with dark blue stripes; a real mysterious dim light, you walked in there and you're surrounded by all this kind of strange, ominous light --

BUCK PENNINGTON: The painting was creating light.

GENE DAVIS: -- its own dark kind of light. It's a rather mysterious piece, total opposite from the extroverted content of the rotunda piece or either of the outdoor pieces that I've done, which are kind of optimistic, upbeat in colors.

BUCK PENNINGTON: The rotunda piece was very pastel.

GENE DAVIS: No. [overlapping voices during short distancing from recording equipment]

BUCK PENNINGTON: But then it was painted over.

GENE DAVIS: Yes, it's still down there --

BUCK PENNINGTON: It's underneath that white --

GENE DAVIS: -- underneath the white paint and the crows are -- in fact, one of the trustees, a bit of a wag, came up with a suggestion, saying the crows are right on top of the stripe painting; after the show was over.

BUCK PENNINGTON: That would have been interesting.

GENE DAVIS: That would have been.

BUCK PENNINGTON: So now you're in an archeological position. You think (he laughs) you have an unearthed Gene Davis some day, but it's a future project, no doubt. So there's a great conceptual idea -- unearthing Gene Davis! How do you feel about this?

GENE DAVIS: The same is true of the piece at Cranbrook, they painted over that.

BUCK PENNINGTON: Already?

GENE DAVIS: Oh yes, it's gone now.

BUCK PENNINGTON: It was treated like a show?

GENE DAVIS: Would you like to see some photographs of it? (Buck says yes. Silent tape, they're evidently looking at pictures)

BUCK PENNINGTON: Oh, the Cranbrook piece. So, you were painting almost between the marked-out wood lines that look almost like picture rays. Did you install those?

GENE DAVIS: No, they were there.

BUCK PENNINGTON: They are there, blue and black on one side.

GENE DAVIS: This gives you a better feeling of it. (more picture viewing) I think maybe it's essential you see my show before because it's a kind of mini-retrospective of my stripe works. 1958 to 1981, stripes.

BUCK PENNINGTON: (unclear sentence, then:) I'd like to come. This one, at the Corcoran is very exciting, I like this combination, the red and lavender on the right and then the more lime green and blue on the left. I kind of have the feeling it would make that room seem almost like a carrousel to have all that color.

GENE DAVIS: It was very cacophonous.

BUCK PENNINGTON: I think that would be tremendously exciting. And at Cranbrook now.

GENE DAVIS: This was the black and gray side.

BUCK PENNINGTON: How long did it take you?

GENE DAVIS: About two months, something like that.

BUCK PENNINGTON: Were you out there the whole time?

GENE DAVIS: Oh no, assistants did it.

BUCK PENNINGTON: You just did the design for it.

GENE DAVIS: I worked a little bit on it; an artist very rarely works on .

BUCK PENNINGTON: He the selection.

GENE DAVIS: Sol Lewitt had a piece right next to mine.

BUCK PENNINGTON: So it doesn't bother you to see your art go up and come down and be disposable.

GENE DAVIS: Yes it bothers me, what can you do about it?

BUCK PENNINGTON: (laughing) People will have to unearth these two.

GENE DAVIS: This one fantastic work, it's got to be there still.

BUCK PENNINGTON: It looks very exciting, it looks like there would be almost --

GENE DAVIS: It's moody.

BUCK PENNINGTON: The mood, yes, which is tremendous.

[The sound changes here; evidently in a large open area, with an echo; Davis's voice is more distant than Pennington's]

BUCK PENNINGTON: You're getting ready for a show?

GENE DAVIS: Yes. The [proper name] Drysdale Gallery, the retrospective of my stripe -- stripe format, trying to show as much variety as possible from 1968 to 1981.

BUCK PENNINGTON: What about these other lots? Are they new works in progress?

GENE DAVIS: They're finished works.

BUCK PENNINGTON: Oh: they are finished. We're turning to a black tonality, almost like .

GENE DAVIS: Yes, it's not a very .

BUCK PENNINGTON: The ones on the wall are --

GENE DAVIS: These are sort of painterly versions of my drawings upstairs. They don't have the collage effect but they're playful and --

BUCK PENNINGTON: A whole series. Have you shown these?

GENE DAVIS: Yes, but that's a year ago, at [proper name] Gallery. The young artists were much smitten with

these, for some reason or other.

BUCK PENNINGTON: What about these very, very narrow, narrow pieces that you did, are those a recent phenomenon or --

GENE DAVIS: (unclear beginning to sentence) probably the first ones like that. Some of those -- I like the way they to the wall, they up the wall.

BUCK PENNINGTON: They're very architectural.

GENE DAVIS: Very much so.

BUCK PENNINGTON: They create an effect of almost a stripe within a stripe because of the .

GENE DAVIS: Yes. These are four interrelated -- I think they're eight feet long and about three and a half inches wide. And they have 1/8 inch wide stripes. And I've used the same colors in all four of those paintings but in a different alignment, so that they all kind of relate color-wise and size so that you get a complex interrelationship.

BUCK PENNINGTON: You did this in series of, say, four, five, six, or --

GENE DAVIS: Usually I do them singly. This is the first time I've ever interrelated them, . This is a horizontal, this must be seen horizontally. [he continues moving farther away]

BUCK PENNINGTON: They look like (he laughs) decorative bottles [?] on military, you know, ing away. What about these smaller pieces on the floor?

GENE DAVIS: Those, believe it or not, are sort of study -- I'm , now, one of my big ones. I find them rather nice.

BUCK PENNINGTON: I think they look wonderful together.

GENE DAVIS: Yes, they do.

BUCK PENNINGTON: That almost has, in a way, a effect, in that it's a patch of color next to a patch of color, and the interval there doesn't strike me as being a stripe between them right there in the green and the blue. It doesn't quite obtain have a stripe effect.

GENE DAVIS: Right. There's a small blue one.

BUCK PENNINGTON: That's very exciting. That almost has a fabric-like [?] quality.

[An interlude of several exchanges with overlapping voices, canvases banging, voices remote, fragmentary speech, mostly Pennington's]

BUCK PENNINGTON: .... were paintings in which there was a great deal of between the colors.

GENE DAVIS: Oh yes, right.

BUCK PENNINGTON: Have you moved out of that?

GENE DAVIS: Oh no, very much here. [bang bang of canvases] that right now.

BUCK PENNINGTON: That's your principal color style.

GENE DAVIS: Yes. Moving out of that sharp delineation and into and then you would that color all together.

GENE DAVIS: (inaudible, still audibly rearranging canvases)

BUCK PENNINGTON: (after a silent interval) And here, the thought that you hadn't made the effort to so sharply define each stripe.

GENE DAVIS: No.

BUCK PENNINGTON: It's a color within color, each line.

GENE DAVIS: Right.

BUCK PENNINGTON: It the lines are sufficiently . So it has a very patterned effect, random and very kinetic. It's

very optic --

GENE DAVIS: Yes.

BUCK PENNINGTON: -- and it's . These look like -- they have a naturalistic quality about them.

GENE DAVIS: Yes, they're somewhat .

BUCK PENNINGTON: (confusing exchange, both have moved too far away) All at random, you don't set out to make that particular piece?

GENE DAVIS: No.

BUCK PENNINGTON: You just put in each line --

GENE DAVIS: It's involved in the process, it grows out of the process.

BUCK PENNINGTON: Are you working strictly left to right, or like in your other --?

GENE DAVIS: All at random [?]

BUCK PENNINGTON: It is a much, much more sophisticated way than just dribbling paint but there is still a random quality to it --

GENE DAVIS: Yes.

BUCK PENNINGTON: -- instead of just taking your hand and stretching out and going in one -- I guess you're not moving from one side to another in a formal way.

GENE DAVIS: (banging continuing) Well, three colors at most. somehow where I use 15 colors very exciting. (Davis is pounding on something)

BUCK PENNINGTON: Do you work exclusively here?

GENE DAVIS: Yep.

BUCK PENNINGTON: Walter commented on the fact there were no windows --

GENE DAVIS: There are two windows

BUCK PENNINGTON: You don't need that much light.

GENE DAVIS: Nope.

BUCK PENNINGTON:

(several exchanges, inaudible from interference)

GENE DAVIS: In other words, equal amount of green than in the blue.

BUCK PENNINGTON: (several sentences later) These are all things you showed at the Corcoran.

GENE DAVIS: Yes.

BUCK PENNINGTON: Are you starting ?

GENE DAVIS: (moving in closer) I've had five one-man shows at the Corcoran, so I think I've just about worn out my welcome.

BUCK PENNINGTON: More than anyone else.

GENE DAVIS: Yes. No one has ever had that many shows.

BUCK PENNINGTON: But you're teaching down there.

GENE DAVIS: But that has nothing to do with it now. The school and the gallery are not connected.

BUCK PENNINGTON: How often there now?

GENE DAVIS: Two afternoons a week.

BUCK PENNINGTON: And you paint with them?

GENE DAVIS: Paint with them? What do you mean?

Buck BUCK PENNINGTON: I mean, are you working some kind of

GENE DAVIS: Oh! painting outside my studio like mad.

BUCK PENNINGTON: This is like the one at the National Collection on the second floor. (They have moved farther away again)

GENE DAVIS: (something about "the children's room" at NCFA) And then they have two more that they haven't put up.

END OF INTERVIEW

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