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Oral history interview with Janet I. Fish,  
1988 Jan. 30-Mar. 2

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## **Transcript**

### **Preface**

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Janet Fish on January 30, January 31, and March 2, 1988. The interview took place in New York City, and was conducted by Barbara Shikler for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

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

### **Interview**

[00:00:05.87]

BARBARA SHIKLER: This is Barbara Shikler, January 30, 1988. I'm with Janet Fish at her studio at 101 Prince Street in New York City.

[Recorder stops; restarts.]

Side one.

[Recorder stops; restarts.]

Again. Good morning. Let's go over everything again.

[00:00:28.71]

JANET FISH: Okay.

[00:00:30.28]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Could give me your full name one more time?

[00:00:32.51]

JANET FISH: Janet Isobel Fish.

[00:00:34.20]

BARBARA SHIKLER: All right, and your birth date, your exact birth date?

[00:00:36.94]

JANET FISH: 5/18/38.

[00:00:38.11]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Okay, and your mother's name?

[00:00:39.96]

JANET FISH: Florence Whistler Fish.

[00:00:42.73]

BARBARA SHIKLER: You were saying something when we spoke earlier about her relationship with Whistler, or what the connection was.

[00:00:50.19]

JANET FISH: Well, I think it's probably relating to a cousin or something. Her godfather jumped in at her christening and named her after his wife instead of whatever name she was supposed to be called.

[00:01:01.92]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Where was she from?

[00:01:03.77]

JANET FISH: She grew up in Connecticut and in Bermuda.

[00:01:08.37]

BARBARA SHIKLER: I see. And your father?

[00:01:11.82]

JANET FISH: He, his name is Peter Stuyvesant Fish. And he grew up in New York, New York State.

[00:01:19.48]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Do you have any idea how they met?

[00:01:22.91]

JANET FISH: My mother's brother was at Trinity College, and he was a friend of my mother's brother Clark. And I think that's how they met.

[00:01:34.07]

BARBARA SHIKLER: I see. And that brings us to your grandfather, Clark Voorhees.

[00:01:37.45]

JANET FISH: Clark Voorhees was one of the American Impressionist painters in the Old Lyme School. He was one of the first people there. He discovered Old Lyme when he was at Yale College. He'd bicycled out there a number of times. And then later on, he got some friends to go there.

[00:01:56.41]

BARBARA SHIKLER: I was wondering about the name Florence. You know the Griswold Museum in Lyme.

[00:02:03.47]

JANET FISH: Florence.

[00:02:04.07]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Florence Griswold. I wonder if that name got in there for any reason related to that.

[00:02:09.32]

JANET FISH: No. She said that it was her godfather, some other reason. [Laughs.]

[00:02:14.09]

BARBARA SHIKLER: I see. And your uncle is also named Clark Voorhees.

[00:02:18.52]

JANET FISH: He was a woodworker and a sculptor.

[00:02:22.41]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Uh-huh [affirmative]. Okay. Did I ask you this time around or last time we spoke? Well, you say your mother grew up in Bermuda, as well as—

[00:02:35.29]

JANET FISH: In Connecticut.

[00:02:36.40]

BARBARA SHIKLER: —in Connecticut.

[00:02:36.94]

JANET FISH: Yeah.

[00:02:37.93]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Apparently you grew up to some extent, for some time in Bermuda.

[00:02:42.91]

JANET FISH: Yes. We were in Connecticut until I—well, we'd been in Bermuda when I was a little baby, and then we lived in Connecticut. My father had a job at the Electric Boat Company. And then he got ill when I was around ten, and we moved to Bermuda, where I stayed until I went to college.

[00:03:03.67]

BARBARA SHIKLER: I read somewhere that he was a teacher of art history.

[00:03:09.64]

JANET FISH: He taught at the Roxbury Latin School at one time. Just around the time I was born, he was teaching in Boston at the Roxbury Latin School. And he told me that he had actually taught some art history. I don't know that he knows much about it.

[00:03:26.63]

BARBARA SHIKLER: I see. But he wasn't himself involved with art to any extent?

[00:03:30.04]

JANET FISH: No, he wasn't. No.

[00:03:30.95]

BARBARA SHIKLER: What was he doing at the Electric Boat Company?

[00:03:33.11]

JANET FISH: He started out as a ship fitter's assistant, and then he sort of got into management somehow, somewhere along the line.

[00:03:40.88]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Are your parents living?

[00:03:42.29]

JANET FISH: Yes.

[00:03:42.91]

BARBARA SHIKLER: They are. Well, that's—Okay, I guess the whole thing, really, the questions about family have to do with the family dynamics, how you got to be the Janet Fish we know. What were some of the family dynamics there, for instance, which you feel were influential? Was there much discussion of painting and art? How involved were you in that?

[00:04:08.68]

JANET FISH: Well, my mother was always working on things. She had gone to the Boston Museum School, and was a sculptor. So she continued working a bit, though when she had children, I guess we took up more of her time. And so she always had some kind of activity in art. Then when we were in Connecticut, when I was younger, my uncle Clark Voorhees' house was fairly near us. And he and his wife were both artists. So we would go over there a lot to play with our cousins. And there were a lot of artists in our lives, so art was part of the whole thing. [Telephone rings.]

[00:04:55.20]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Let's pause.

[Recorder stops; restarts.]

Okay, continue.

[00:04:57.74]

JANET FISH: And my parents knew a great many artists there. It was sort of an artist colony around in Old Lyme. So art was always part of my life. So I basically, probably because my mother was a painter, I had always just sort of said that I was going to be an artist. I thought I'd be a sculptor like her. And when you're a little child, that doesn't really mean much. When we went to Bermuda, they didn't teach art in school, but I took some classes outside of school. Well, they did have one art class. I didn't do well, and the art teacher didn't care for me. She said I was lazy, or I would never be a success. [They laugh.] I have a report card still with it on it.

[00:05:39.21]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Have you sent her copies of your notices? [They laugh.]

[00:05:42.14]

JANET FISH: I don't know what happened to her. And then when I was 15, I worked as an apprentice to a sculptress in Bermuda named Byllee Lang. I just sort of helped around the studio. And in payment, basically, she would give a few art lessons. And she gave me some jewelry. And she was very short and fat, but she'd give me her old clothes, so that I could remake them. That was the kind of pay that she would give.

[00:06:13.65]

BARBARA SHIKLER: That's terrific. How did you know how to do that? How did you know how to remake clothes?

[00:06:18.87]

JANET FISH: Well, we did learn to sew and stuff. Well, in school, you learn home economics, right?

[00:06:27.22]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Cinnamon toast.

[00:06:28.39]

JANET FISH: Yes. [Laughs.] So I knew all that kind of stuff.

[00:06:31.60]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Did you have brothers and sisters?

[00:06:33.22]

JANET FISH: Yeah, I have a brother and a sister. My sister is a photographer and teaches at Pennsylvania College of Art.

[00:06:42.37]

BARBARA SHIKLER: What's her name?

[00:06:43.51]

JANET FISH: Alida Fish.

[00:06:44.37]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Oh, yes. That's the Alida.

[00:06:47.13]

JANET FISH: And my brother is a clergyman, and he lives in Cornwall in England.

[00:06:53.55]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Oh, fascinating.

[00:06:54.67]

JANET FISH: Yeah.

[00:06:55.33]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Indeed. Was that unanticipated?

[00:06:57.94]

JANET FISH: Well, he was sent to King's College School in Halifax because he had very low grades in Bermuda, and the schools there were really terrible anyway. So they sent him off to this school. And the man who ran the school was a clergyman, and he admired him a great deal. And then he went on to King's College and became a clergyman himself.

[00:07:20.05]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Fascinating. I interrupted you, really, when you were talking about schooling, et cetera, and the exposure to the woman for whom you worked, and whose name has gone out of my head immediately.

[00:07:35.70]

JANET FISH: Oh, Byllee Lang.

[00:07:36.52]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Byllee Lang. How long were you in Roxbury and how—I mean, in Bermuda? How long did all of that last?

[00:07:42.40]

JANET FISH: Oh, Bermuda, that was from around—let me see. I can't remember when we moved there. Well, let me see. What's '38 from—let me see. And ten years would be '48. Well, I was around—I'm not sure. We moved there somewhere around between '48 and '50. I'm not quite positive. So I was around ten, eleven, twelve.

[00:08:14.08]

BARBARA SHIKLER: And before that, you were in Boston?

[00:08:16.29]

JANET FISH: No, no. We were in Connecticut.

[00:08:18.43]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Oh, you were in Connecticut.

[00:08:19.51]

JANET FISH: No, I was only in Boston for a couple of weeks and then we went to Bermuda.

[00:08:22.90]

BARBARA SHIKLER: I see, so that's a little misleading.

[00:08:24.70]

JANET FISH: Yeah. No, I was born in Boston. But then my family went immediately to Bermuda.

[00:08:31.03]

BARBARA SHIKLER: I see, Okay.

[00:08:32.80]

JANET FISH: Then they went back to the States. And that's when we lived in Connecticut.

[00:08:39.58]

BARBARA SHIKLER: I see. Whereabouts in Connecticut?

[00:08:42.60]

JANET FISH: Hamburg, Connecticut. It's near Lyme, Old Lyme.

[00:08:46.28]

BARBARA SHIKLER: So you more or less really grew up immersed in that tradition, so to speak?

[00:08:50.98]

JANET FISH: Yeah.

[00:08:51.59]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Yeah. Were you interested in your grandfather's work, and the Impressionists?

[00:08:55.60]

JANET FISH: Well, it's hard to say. I mean, my grandfather's work hung on all the walls, so I saw it all the time. And you know, children don't pay all that much attention to things. We always made things. My mother would—we went to school and learned how to make stick figures and things like that. My mother would get enraged and tell us we were to never draw a figure like that. And we weren't supposed to—I used to draw a little—they showed us how to draw a circle, and you put a circle on that, and you put stick arms out. And that kind of thing would enrage her.

[00:09:32.65]

BARBARA SHIKLER: What did she want you to do?

[00:09:33.90]

JANET FISH: Oh, look at—draw a figure some other way, but not have a formula.

[00:09:37.86]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Yeah. So it was really part of your daily life, in a sense. You were immersed completely in that kind of feeling, the feeling of art.

[00:09:47.32]

JANET FISH: Yes, in a sense. As you know, art is a way of life. Yeah, that's certainly, I saw it. So I had no reason to think—none of the artists that I knew when I was a child were famous, rich artists or anything. They were just people who made art and led a life.

[00:10:04.60]

BARBARA SHIKLER: I think the art world was so different in those days, anyway.

[00:10:07.66]

JANET FISH: It was, yeah.

[00:10:08.61]

BARBARA SHIKLER: The whole business of being famous and rich wasn't even a speculative thought.

[00:10:13.97]

JANET FISH: It wasn't. Yeah, you kind of assumed that you didn't make money at art.

[00:10:18.25]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Yes, great surprises are in store. [Laughs.]

[00:10:21.09]

JANET FISH: Yeah.

[00:10:21.87]

BARBARA SHIKLER: So apparently your mother was a very strong lady, and she encouraged you.

[00:10:29.45]

JANET FISH: I think she was encouraging in a way. And then I think they sort of thought that we should get married—go to college, and get married, and do that kind of stuff. So there was encouragement. Yeah, I suppose you'd say as much encouragement for that as anything.

[00:10:52.33]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Well, I guess appropriate to the time. It was really understood, I guess, at that time that women did get married.

[00:10:59.85]

JANET FISH: Yeah.

[00:11:00.09]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Was your mother a fairly strong person in the family?

[00:11:06.05]

JANET FISH: I think my father was home all the time after we moved to Bermuda. And he was a bit of a hypochondriac and a tyrant. But she had a kiln and was making ceramics and



things. So, they were—you could say she was strong.

[00:11:29.03]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Yeah. I have a note that she was president of the Bermuda Arts Society, somewhere here.

[00:11:35.91]

JANET FISH: She was certainly in the Bermuda Arts Society. I don't know if she was a president or not. I'm not sure about that. It might have happened while I was away in college.

[00:11:45.44]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Okay. Silly question, but did you like your mother's work? Did you think about it with any objectivity—then, now?

[00:11:57.13]

JANET FISH: Then? No, I never thought about like, or not like, actually. I never really thought about it.

[00:12:06.94]

BARBARA SHIKLER: What was it like?

[00:12:08.40]

JANET FISH: She did animal sculptures. She loves animals, and most of her sculpture is animals. Later on she took to painting a bit. But I think her father had painted so much, I think she learned to paint maybe from her father.

[00:12:28.83]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Did you know him?

[00:12:30.07]

JANET FISH: No, I never met him. He died long before I was born.

[00:12:33.75]

BARBARA SHIKLER: What was your earliest work that you recall really a specific moment at which you remember what you did?

[00:12:40.54]

JANET FISH: Oh, I remember trying to copy an Aztec sculpture out of a magazine and failing, trying to whittle it out of wood and draw the plan on. My mother told me that you had to draw it from all the different sides. And I remember that I never got anywhere with it. And it's sort of hard to remember—I made clay things. When she had the kiln in Bermuda, we used to go in and make things—try and make a dish, or make a figure, or make a piggy bank, whatever. Mostly, I have to say it was just kid stuff, you know.

[00:13:18.01]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Yeah. But that was your form of play or recreation.

[00:13:21.17]

JANET FISH: Yeah. Sometimes, yeah. Well, just as much as any other child that gets near clay.

[00:13:27.46]

BARBARA SHIKLER: What were some of the other things you enjoyed doing as a child? Were you one of those people who played with dolls?

[00:13:33.94]

JANET FISH: I never liked dolls that much, but I liked doll houses. And I read a great deal. I think I spent most of my time reading.

[00:13:42.19]

BARBARA SHIKLER: You did?

[00:13:43.06]

JANET FISH: Yeah.

[00:13:43.35]

BARBARA SHIKLER: What sort of things did you like?

[00:13:44.98]

JANET FISH: Oh, just anything. I read all the children's books. And then you go to the library and read everything. The library had some pretty strange books in it.

[00:13:53.92]

BARBARA SHIKLER: What do you mean?

[00:13:54.76]

JANET FISH: They had things like called *The Black Plague*, and *The Tower of London*, and Victorian horror novels.

[00:14:00.32]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Yes, it's very British, I guess.

[00:14:02.23]

JANET FISH: Yeah.

[00:14:02.68]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Did they have things like Nancy Drew out there, or was that out of your range?

[00:14:06.52]

JANET FISH: Nancy Drew, I never liked things with guns and murders in them, so I didn't read much of that. But my father had a complete collection of G.A. Henty, and I read all of those. And they had a huge kind of thing left over also from his childhood called *The Book of Knowledge*, and we used to go through that a lot. It told you how to make bows and arrows, and teepees, and log cabins.

[00:14:31.65]

BARBARA SHIKLER: So your life is really fairly consistent with your beginning.

[00:14:34.80]

JANET FISH: Yeah.

[00:14:35.46]

BARBARA SHIKLER: In a sense, you've just more or less continued. I was curious about the domestic life because one is so aware of domestic things in your work, not that it's the only thing that one is aware of.

[00:14:50.97]

JANET FISH: Uh-huh [affirmative].

[00:14:51.21]

BARBARA SHIKLER: But I wondered about, for instance, your home. Was your mother domestic as well as creative?

[00:14:57.30]

JANET FISH: She wasn't at all interested in housekeeping. And her thing was her mother had always said that things were clean underneath, but not on top.

[00:15:08.73]

BARBARA SHIKLER: About her, you mean?

[00:15:10.02]

JANET FISH: Well, no, just in general. That was her mother had always—nobody was particularly good at keeping house, or interested in it.

[00:15:17.64]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Did you have maids there? I should think it would have been fairly—

[00:15:20.87]

JANET FISH: Not always. But there was an old woman that had worked for my grandmother that would come and clean maybe once a week. But she was quite old, so she just did whatever she felt like doing before she went home, I think.

[00:15:39.81]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Well, your home is a repository, your loft, for so many different kinds of things. And there seems to be such a relish for the beauty of objects. And I wondered whether that was something you were aware of at home.

[00:15:55.70]

JANET FISH: Oh, yeah. I think that could have come from it, because our house was always packed with knickknacks and things around. And my father would dig up bottles from the dumps around the house because in Bermuda, everyone throws their garbage over the fence into their neighbors' land. And so they were all around the edge of your field, the terrific dump sites.

[00:16:19.55]

BARBARA SHIKLER: So here we have bottles at a very early age.

[00:16:22.47]

JANET FISH: Right. [Laughs.]

[00:16:23.60]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Bottles arrive very soon on the scene.

[00:16:27.67]

JANET FISH: Yeah.

[00:16:29.14]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Let's just take a pause.

[Recorder stops; restarts.]

We'll continue here. I was going to ask you about friends, friends both in Bermuda and in Connecticut, whether they were people who shared your interests and influenced you, et cetera.

[00:16:48.62]

JANET FISH: Well, let me see. When I lived in Connecticut, there was a girl my age who lived nearby who was the daughter of a composer, Johanna Franchetti. And so we were pretty good friends before I left for Bermuda. And he was always—so when I stayed over there, he'd be playing in the mornings. And in the early morning, you'd hear him composing and things. And I always liked that family because her father seemed so glamorous to me. But basically, I was a very shy person who didn't have many friends. And I was pretty isolated, which is probably why I read so much.

[00:17:31.09]

BARBARA SHIKLER: You were isolated at your own instigation, so to speak?

[00:17:35.53]

JANET FISH: Well it didn't seem so to me, but probably. I mean, a shy child doesn't relate to anybody.

[00:17:41.48]

BARBARA SHIKLER: You never ran with a group, so to speak, or met on anybody's porch, et cetera.

[00:17:47.95]

JANET FISH: No. I think I was pretty isolated, very, very, very shy.

[00:17:55.05]

BARBARA SHIKLER: That doesn't haunt you now.

[00:17:58.75]

JANET FISH: Well, it takes a while to get over it.

[00:18:01.18]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Yes, it does. Well, what was the—let's say, how was the time filled between what we're talking about and Smith? How did you get to choose Smith? What led up to Smith as a place that you chose to go?

[00:18:15.88]

JANET FISH: Probably also because I was so shy and had so few friends, I also did well in school—moderately well, anyway. So in my school, well, it was always assumed that because I was shy, and also taller than most of the people on the island, that I would be an old maid schoolteacher. [Laughs.] That was the career that everyone really had planned. My parents, I think, believed that I would come home and take care of them in their old age and get a job.

[00:18:44.13]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Good God.

[00:18:45.74]

JANET FISH: So that was a general assumption. And I was in the classes that there were about three or four people that looked like they would probably go to university or something. The school wanted us to all go to apply to Cambridge, because they were trying to get a scholarship to the island to Cambridge. And if they could get enough people—I think there was a very heavy encouragement to try and get us to go to an English college. But simply because I hated this future that seemed planned for me, the last thing I wanted to go was to an English school which I perceived as being full of bluestockings, you know?

[00:19:26.45]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Sure.

[00:19:27.28]

JANET FISH: And it seemed an unattractive future to me. So I took the Cambridge School Certificate. We all did. And I even took the higher certificate, I think. But by the time I took the higher certificate, I'd gotten into American colleges. And I applied to a lot of colleges, ones that my parents had heard of. Like, I applied to Radcliffe, Wellesley, Smith, I believe Bennington, and something else, Bard.

[00:20:01.57]

And then the mother of that girl that I had known in Connecticut that was my—she was also applying to colleges. And her mother sent a kind of flippant rundown on colleges to my parents because I got accepted to everything, probably because of coming from Bermuda. And so—how did it go? I remember that I think it was Bennington, she thought it said had shotgun marriages. And Radcliffe were the dreaded bluestockings. [They laugh.]

[00:20:36.99]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Yes.

[00:20:37.59]

JANET FISH: And she had a sort of one-liner on every college. Oh, and Vassar, that was another college. But what happened was I chose Smith because it had the most art, and I really wanted to go to art school. But my parents had said that if I would finish college and still wanted to go to art school, I could go to art school. So I picked the college that gave the most painting and courses and things.

[00:21:04.28]

BARBARA SHIKLER: What year did you get into Smith?

[00:21:06.11]

JANET FISH: So that would have been probably '58, I think, because I graduated in '60.

[00:21:12.02]

BARBARA SHIKLER: And what degrees? Was that an MFA?

[00:21:14.60]

JANET FISH: That's a BA.

[00:21:15.41]

BARBARA SHIKLER: I mean, a BA.

[00:21:16.20]

JANET FISH: Yeah.

[00:21:16.70]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Yeah. Well, here we get to some of the teachers you had at Smith, which always make me giggle because your descriptions of Baskin as a teacher with his likes and dislikes are so funny. [They laugh.] You want to talk about that a little bit? He sounded like such a curmudgeon.

[00:21:32.01]

JANET FISH: He taught printmaking and sculpture. And he was a very popular teacher and we all took things. And then there was George Cohen and Mervin Jules were the people who taught there. Baskin had a very narrow approach to things. The drawing class I took—I think it was the first drawing class—he took pen and ink and drew a shell for a semester. And then you took pen and ink and drew water for a semester.

[00:21:59.52]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Oh, God. [They laugh.]

[00:22:04.03]

JANET FISH: And he didn't approve of aquatint. But we did etching, but no aquatint.

[00:22:08.64]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Why didn't he approve of it?

[00:22:09.78]

JANET FISH: Oh, it was morally wrong.

[00:22:10.47]

BARBARA SHIKLER: That's so moralistic.

[00:22:11.21]

JANET FISH: Yes. And I remember him taking us into the gallery when there was a show. And it had Rothko, and Lee Bontecou, and people in it. And he was giving us a lecture on how terrible all this art was. But he was very interested. And we didn't know any better. We didn't know anything. And certainly, Smith's idea of a modern art course ended at the Impressionists. So it was all a mystery to me when I got to Yale, all this painting that had happened since the Impressionists was quite a discovery.

[00:22:42.18]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Apparently he was also very, very vehemently anti-Kline and all the Abstract Expressionists.

[00:22:47.46]

JANET FISH: Yeah, yeah.

[00:22:48.03]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Had looked at them? Did he show you? Had you seen?

[00:22:51.87]

JANET FISH: Well, we didn't see much. I mean, just for that one lecture where we were told how bad they were. And then the art history department at that point didn't seem terribly interested in living painters. So I was studying art history, but I didn't know much about contemporary at all.

[00:23:10.11]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Did you have a feeling about it, though? When he was saying, "boo," were you saying, "yea," in your mind somehow?

[00:23:16.98]

JANET FISH: I liked the Lee Bontecou sculpture, but I really didn't know much about why any of those things were or what the people were trying to do. How would I know? No one explained it. Sometimes you walk up cold to a Kline, you've never seen one before, you might not have a lot of reason to pay attention to it.

[00:23:33.99]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Surely.

[00:23:37.15]

JANET FISH: So really, contemporary painting was—the painters that I knew about, there

were some painters he liked—Morris Graves, for instance, or Lasansky. Ben Shahn was a friend of his. And Ben Shahn, we saw a lot of the—in the art classes, I think there was some wacky initial painting classes where you painted in different styles. And I think there—it's not totally accurate. I didn't know anything about it because I believe we tried to paint a Cubist painting. You did one in each style, one painting in each style. [Laughs.]

[00:24:18.09]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Did you study the Cubists to any degree there, or did they skip that, too?

[00:24:22.53]

JANET FISH: No, that was in the painting class. Like, you were shown a Cubist painting and you tried to make a Cubist painting.

[00:24:28.26]

BARBARA SHIKLER: But no discussion about it?

[00:24:29.67]

JANET FISH: There was probably some discussion. I mean, I'll tell you it's a long time ago.

[00:24:34.41]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Yeah, of course.

[00:24:35.04]

JANET FISH: You're asking me questions about things I can barely remember.

[00:24:37.41]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Of course, of course, but it's fascinating. Apparently one of his likes was—is this correct? He was really crazy about the pre-Raphaelites?

[00:24:45.45]

JANET FISH: No, no. Baskin?

[00:24:47.78]

BARBARA SHIKLER: I have a note about the pre-Raphaelites. And I don't know why. You said that for years, you kept seeing their mournful faces and droopy garb.

[00:24:56.58]

JANET FISH: No, that wasn't anything to do with my teachers at all, no.

[00:25:01.50]

BARBARA SHIKLER: I see.

[00:25:02.01]

JANET FISH: I'm not even sure that had anything to do with that time. That was an opinion I had about the pre-Raphaelites. I loathed those faces. I could say that I still do. I probably was expressing a current opinion.

[00:25:14.16]

BARBARA SHIKLER: I see. Okay. [Laughs.]

[00:25:17.16]

JANET FISH: But I must have seen some Burchfield paintings at the time, because some of the paintings I was doing seem to me now to have been influenced by Burchfield. And Morris

Graves, I was very fond of his work. Those are two artists I can remember from that time.

[00:25:36.81]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Do you have any of your own work from that time?

[00:25:39.45]

JANET FISH: Probably somewhere I do. A lot of it got destroyed. But I think my parents have things around, and a couple of things here and there probably. I went and stayed with a friend in Montclair and took some classes at the Art Students League. I took a drawing class and—oh, let's see—it was a painting class. And I think—

[00:26:06.64]

BARBARA SHIKLER: When was that? Let's just try and nail that down in sequence if we can. While you were at Smith?

[00:26:12.21]

JANET FISH: Yeah, that would have been while I was at Smith. It was probably was probably about '59 or so.

[00:26:20.75]

BARBARA SHIKLER: You don't sound very lazy to me. It's quite a trek—

[00:26:24.25]

JANET FISH: Oh, that was just that teacher.

[00:26:25.66]

BARBARA SHIKLER: —I guess, [they laugh] from Smith, to Montclair, to the Art Students League, and back. Who did you study with at the Art Students League? Anybody that—

[00:26:35.89]

JANET FISH: This guy Greene. I'm not sure if he was Stephen Greene or Balcomb Greene. I'm not really positive.

[00:26:41.19]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Yeah.

[00:26:41.95]

JANET FISH: But his name was Greene. And he was very—I think it was the first time he taught or something, because he was very unhappy. I remember him coming up to me. And I was sitting there. And he said, "You. You at least will do what I say," he said. He's crying, you know? [They laugh.]

[00:26:58.63]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Was he young?

[00:27:00.30]

JANET FISH: I think he was. Whoever it was was young at the time, you know?

[00:27:03.73]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Yeah.

[00:27:04.21]

JANET FISH: He seemed like he was very unhappy. And I was just sort of confused. Some



student was probably giving him a hard time.

[00:27:10.89]

BARBARA SHIKLER: What a burden on you to have to make this teacher happy.

[00:27:13.48]

JANET FISH: Well, I didn't know enough to do it his way or not, probably. That's why he could count on it.

[00:27:19.75]

BARBARA SHIKLER: How long were you there?

[00:27:21.66]

JANET FISH: That was just a summer class. Yeah.

[00:27:23.50]

BARBARA SHIKLER: I see, I see. The next two things that seem to be on the horizon are Yale and Skowhegan, and I'm not sure of the dates.

[00:27:32.31]

JANET FISH: I went to Yale, and while I was at Yale, I went to Skowhegan.

[00:27:35.29]

BARBARA SHIKLER: That's what it seemed to be.

[00:27:36.34]

JANET FISH: Skowhegan is a summer school.

[00:27:37.86]

BARBARA SHIKLER: So that Yale was when, '63?

[00:27:40.18]

JANET FISH: '60 to '63. I graduated in '63.

[00:27:43.15]

BARBARA SHIKLER: And Skowhegan was—how many summers did you do that?

[00:27:47.11]

JANET FISH: Only once, one summer. Yeah. And I think it must have been—let's see. If I went there in '60, I probably went to Skowhegan '60 or '61. That's hard to remember.

[00:28:04.54]

BARBARA SHIKLER: But it was fairly parallel with the beginning of your Yale experience, which sounds so crucial in your life.

[00:28:12.15]

JANET FISH: Yeah. Well, Yale, I discovered modern art. I mean, Alex Katz taught the beginning painting class when I was there. And he made us aware of all the things that were happening in New York, and encouraged us to go look at paintings, which we did. We would all pile into a car, and go into the city, and look at things. And there was a girl there who painted just like Clyfford Still. And he gave her an A-plus. I remember we all stood around the painting, like, trying to figure out how this got to be an A-plus painting.

[00:28:49.21]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Who was she? Do you remember that?

[00:28:50.62]

JANET FISH: I can't remember her name, and she probably paints differently now.

[00:28:53.73]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Yeah, if she paints at all.

[00:28:55.28]

JANET FISH: Yeah.

[00:28:56.40]

BARBARA SHIKLER: When were you at Yale? I hate to get down to little picky stuff like that, but it's always good to get it in.

[00:29:02.50]

JANET FISH: '60 to '63.

[00:29:03.69]

BARBARA SHIKLER: To '63, Okay. You did say that. I'm sorry.

[00:29:06.93]

JANET FISH: Yeah.

[00:29:07.41]

BARBARA SHIKLER: And you got your master's there?

[00:29:09.58]

JANET FISH: Right.

[00:29:09.93]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Okay. Well, Katz clearly was the most powerful force because all interviews include him.

[00:29:16.96]

JANET FISH: Oh, I mention him. I mean, there are other people. I'm not sure that I don't want to exaggerate. In a sense, I have by always mentioning one person. But he had that initial painting class I took. And I appreciated him because of getting to see all this painting that I hadn't known about. And I tried to paint like de Kooning, and I admired his works very much. And I was looking at Abstract Expressionist painting like everybody was then.

[00:29:47.17]

And then the other reason why I mentioned him is that when I went to Skowhegan, I was still slogging away trying to—in the summer. And I was trying to paint these abstract paintings. And I was feeling totally lost and, like, they didn't mean anything to me. And he said this one thing that did make a change in my work because he said, "Well, why don't you just relax? It's the summertime. And just relax. Go out and paint the landscape and forget it all." And so I did. I just sort of left the school, and went out, and sat around this graveyard painting some landscapes.

[00:30:17.78]

And in those landscapes, I really was very influenced by David Park, in particular, and the California painters. Bischoff was there at the school at the time. And we were also aware from some show or something of some of these other California paintings. Diebenkorn was somebody else that I looked at a lot—

[00:30:41.26]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Yeah.

[00:30:41.53]

JANET FISH: —but most particularly Park. And so that brought me into looking, painting images, painting something that I was seeing. And then I took that as a way out of a lot of the verbal stuff that was going on because I felt it was all words, and that we were learning rules for painting abstract, or that it was just arranging paint. We were learning how to do that, and it didn't mean anything to me. So I stopped listening to anybody and just started looking at things. And so that was a big change. So when he's telling me to do—why don't I relax and just paint the landscape for a while, it had that effect. It was the right words at the right time.

[00:31:28.77]

BARBARA SHIKLER: It was a freeing effect, really.

[00:31:30.95]

JANET FISH: Yeah.

[00:31:31.31]

BARBARA SHIKLER: It's fascinating that almost simultaneous with your discovering the abstractionists, the Abstract Expressionists, you were also aware immediately that that's not the way you were comfortable painting. It's a funny sort of juxtaposition, but interesting.

[00:31:46.82]

JANET FISH: There was much about the painting that I still like. And there's a lot of painting I like. But I needed to have a personal connection to what I was doing. And I didn't feel it for that. I had to find it in some other way.

[00:32:03.37]

BARBARA SHIKLER: It's interesting that you gave yourself permission for that. All through the interview, I find myself writing it when I was putting down things about you. It occurred to me at every step of the way that one of the key things in the development of an artist is the ability to give herself or himself permission to do something which doesn't seem to be acceptable or approved of generally, and you've done that.

[00:32:29.18]

JANET FISH: I think I was probably—because I was so shy and I was still a very shy person when I was at art school, and very withdrawn, and subject to immense depressions and things. But shy people are very stubborn, a lot of shy people. They're also very critical. Underneath it all, you'll find a lot of shy people very nasty. [They laugh.]

[00:32:53.63]

And I had a lot of thoughts. I didn't say things. People would come up and say things to me, and I would be angry. We were just thinking today, walking out, when people would come up and say, "Well, you're just here to catch a man." And I would be looking at them and thinking kind of furiously how wrong they were, but I would never say it. It was just sort of locked up inside myself. But when you're that way, you're, in a sense, not communicating, and you do make a lot of decisions for yourself.

[00:33:24.32]

BARBARA SHIKLER: You know, what you're saying about "here to catch a man," I'm just going to state that I think towards another point in the discussion we'll discuss feminism.

[00:33:37.80]

JANET FISH: Yes.

[00:33:38.41]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Because you seem to be continually bombarded by this sort of thing. And that was so typical of that time, and I gather, very typical of the abstractionists.

[00:33:45.45]

JANET FISH: Oh, yeah.

[00:33:47.02]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Their idea of women were groupies, essentially.

[00:33:49.78]

JANET FISH: Yeah. Well, they liked to go to the Cedar Bar. And even when you see Paul Georges' paintings with all these buxom ladies leaning over the man.

[00:33:58.45]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Yes.

[00:34:00.10]

JANET FISH: And that's the way they behaved, then. And you didn't really—in a lot of ways, there wasn't respect given. I mean, you'd get criticism. And in some ways, one always senses when you're being praised, and yet there can be—there are walls.

[00:34:20.89]

BARBARA SHIKLER: You felt those walls. Were there a number of other women there?

[00:34:25.75]

JANET FISH: Oh, yeah, a lot of women at Yale.

[00:34:27.58]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Did you discuss it? Was there any kind of—

[00:34:29.80]

JANET FISH: No, we weren't conscious of it.

[00:34:30.64]

BARBARA SHIKLER: —bonding there?

[00:34:31.62]

JANET FISH: No, this was not—this was before women's lib or anything. This was not thought about. We were learning painting as defined by men during—Western painting. And we learned it, and we didn't really question it. I never questioned that I could be a painter. That never entered my head that I couldn't do it, or that I couldn't be as good as anyone else. I always thought that I could be as good as I could push to be. But there was no other reason why I couldn't.

[00:35:04.53]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Was your depression part of that feeling you were getting of a closed, bonded group of men who said there's no room here?

[00:35:14.41]

JANET FISH: No. The depression was left over from my childhood. I was quite crippled by it for quite a few years. I don't think I was over that until I was nearly 30. I was a bit more functional in my later twenties. But that was probably the move to Bermuda, and the isolation, and you know, whatever else—having the kind of things that were going on in the

family led me to be quite mentally ill.

[00:35:45.34]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Yeah. Well, I suppose that's a lot of delving that isn't appropriate here.

[00:35:54.77]

JANET FISH: Yeah.

[00:35:54.85]

BARBARA SHIKLER: So I'm not going to go into the details. Of course, the common jargon is that depression is really anger turned inside out.

[00:36:03.04]

JANET FISH: Anger. [Laughs.] Yeah.

[00:36:03.13]

BARBARA SHIKLER: And you've certainly learned to expel a lot of these energies. I'm curious to know about your fellow students. It'd be interesting to get them down. Also just as a preface to that, to establish here that this was a post-Albers period. You had Jack Tworkov there at that time?

[00:36:22.45]

JANET FISH: No, I did not. Albers had just left, and Tworkov hadn't come, so it was in between. There was a lot of changes going on in the school. The student body was very good. Albers had built that school up in its reputation, and the people who applied were very good. The other students there were terrific.

[00:36:44.66]

And the faculty, they didn't have a position yet, or a decision on the way the school was going, so it caused an enormous amount of ferment, which is why I think so many of the people I went to school with are now still artists and well-known. I mean, during the time that I was there—Harriet Shorr is a painter who lives right around the corner. And Reeva Potoff is in the building. She was there at the same time. Chuck Close, Richard Serra, Nancy Graves, the Mangolds, both of them—and Rackstraw Downs—quite a few people who have all continued. And I think it was all the—we had to make all the decisions about what was good. There wasn't really a strong father figure there telling us what was art. And everybody had to get out and think.

[00:37:42.18]

BARBARA SHIKLER: The impression I have is that there was a good deal of anarchy, and everybody was going his own way, or her own way. Is that correct? And if that's the case, it leads us right to how people responded to your suddenly going your own way, which seemed like a real tangent.

[00:38:00.74]

JANET FISH: Everybody was painting. I mean, there were all the different influences. And there was a lot of discussion and arguing about them. The school closed around ten, and we would go to a bar, and all fight it out. And people were trying like they always do in art school, everybody tried out different ways of painting. I'm not sure that "anarchy" is the word. [Laughs.] But it's simply that when you have a very strong personality leading the school, sometimes that person demands that everyone work like them. This wasn't happening in this school, and people were forced to think. And not only that, they were people who were going to think anyway.

[00:38:40.88]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Apparently when Albers was there, people were interviewed on the basis of their intellect rather than their talents.

[00:38:49.64]

JANET FISH: Uh-huh [affirmative].

[00:38:50.27]

BARBARA SHIKLER: And so you have whole generations of people who were really quite intellectually verbal and polished.

[00:38:59.42]

JANET FISH: We were trained to really be able to talk about our work. I think that's the one thing Yale still probably does for its students is teach them to talk.

[00:39:11.88]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Sometimes too much. You seem to be somewhat anti-theory in your various—

[00:39:16.97]

JANET FISH: Well, theory is all very well, but it's got to—and when you're working in art which is built on substance, like painting or sculpture, the words have to be secondary to what is made, or it doesn't mean much. Otherwise, you can write.

[00:39:40.19]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Indeed, indeed. It seems to be one of the two forces working still in unison.

[00:39:49.28]

JANET FISH: Yeah.

[00:39:49.97]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Did I ask you—I've forgotten whether I asked you who your other teachers were.

[00:39:55.89]

JANET FISH: Oh, there were many teachers. Philip Pearlstein taught a drawing class. And I remember at the time, we were always so amazed by this little guy that looked like a grocer coming in. And he sort of seemed very humble, though I don't think he really is. And he said that we were the best students he ever had. And we all thought we were pretty terrible. So at least this was my feeling at the time, and it seems to me that other people agreed. And we thought that there must be something wrong with this person that thought we were good. But he had very interesting drawing problems.

So I remember that from going to feeling very suspicious about his class, and thinking it was going to be hideous, to really liking it, because he was doing things like bringing in several models. And somehow, the problems seemed different than what we've been getting before. So he turned out to be a very interesting drawing class.

[00:40:47.87]

BARBARA SHIKLER: What were people doing, the model, figuratively?

[00:40:50.84]

JANET FISH: That was in Philip's class. Yeah, it was a model there. We were drawing the model in that class.

[00:40:57.75]

BARBARA SHIKLER: And that was acceptable somehow to the other students as a training?

[00:41:03.79]

JANET FISH: At that time, yeah. I mean, it was probably only a semester, but we were doing it. And there was the Yale drawing class. Bernard Chaet was there. A lot of the people were still at Yale were there one way or another. Some of them, they were fairly young then, and stuff. But William Bailey was assisting somebody. He was seen to be a student assistant, or a teaching—some kind of thing for a class, one of the classes. I forget whether it was a drawing class or a color class.

[00:41:41.60]

BARBARA SHIKLER: What sort of work was he doing then? Trying to relate it to the time.

[00:41:46.51]

JANET FISH: Hard to remember. I believe just before I left the school that I might have seen a couple of his paintings. I think they might have been figures. I'm not sure though, because he was pretty young. I don't know how much attention we were paying. I'm trying to think who else was there. Uh—

[00:42:09.47]

BARBARA SHIKLER: I think you mentioned in some interview that Edwin Dickinson—

[00:42:13.22]

JANET FISH: Schueler.

[00:42:14.04]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Schueler was there?

[00:42:14.48]

JANET FISH: Schueler was there. Esteban Vicente was a visiting critic. I mean, some of these people were visiting critics, and things. Edwin Dickinson came for a night. He gave a lecture. But he was memorable because he went around and gave each of us—well, what we did was these visiting people would come and give crits, and we would follow around. And he had one word of criticism, one word of praise, and one handy hint for each person as he went around. And we followed him. And all of us followed so that we could hear all this information, because once you'd heard him critting everybody, you'd gotten quite a line of stuff. And then later in the evening, he went and sat with us and in one of the student's apartments. And he had an eye from a mummy in his pocket. So that's how I remember.

[00:43:04.90]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Funny. Why did he have an eye from a mummy?

[00:43:06.52]

JANET FISH: He just seemed to carry these things in his pockets, sort of as talismans, yeah.

[00:43:11.27]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Okay. Why don't we take a stop for a moment?

[00:43:15.19]

JANET FISH: Okay.

[00:43:15.52]

BARBARA SHIKLER: I'll really turn—

[Recorder stops; restarts.]

[00:43:18.14]

JANET FISH: Here we go, resuming in our first interview. So many questions about that period because it was such a fertile period. Let's go back to your fellow students, or let's

start with your fellow students.

[00:43:34.67]

JANET FISH: Uh-huh [affirmative].

[00:43:35.44]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Some of those with whom I know you were involved were Close and Serra.

[00:43:41.99]

JANET FISH: Well, basically, let me see. I remember Richard Serra mostly from all the fights we would have in the bar, because he was fun. Each week, he had a new style that he thought was the only way to work. And he would fight for it, and then change his mind, and fight for some other style the next week. [Laughs.] He was probably feeling it out.

[00:44:05.09]

BARBARA SHIKLER: The impression I have of him is that he was rather puckish. What's the story of—

[00:44:09.11]

JANET FISH: Puckish? No. [Laughs.]

[00:44:09.91]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Not so?

[00:44:10.82]

JANET FISH: Bullish.

[00:44:11.17]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Bullish indeed. What is it that he took of yours and wouldn't give back? What is that story?

[00:44:16.13]

JANET FISH: Oh, it was he grabbed a painting of mine and had it up in his studio. And then—where did I tell that story?

[00:44:22.98]

BARBARA SHIKLER: I don't remember where you did, but somewhere I found it.

[00:44:26.07]

JANET FISH: I'm surprised I told anyone that one. Then there was a guy there who was had been going to be a pro baseball player, but he had become an artist instead. And so he's a big, strong guy. So he went roaring up and was beating down Rich's door to get my painting back, my painting and my mirror. It was a self-portrait I'd done.

[00:44:49.98]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Why did he take it?

[00:44:51.18]

JANET FISH: Oh, he was either using it to copy or to think about it. It had been praised. The painting had been praised by some teacher, so he probably wanted to look at it and figure it out. [They laugh.] I mean, not that he—I don't remember him ever painting anything like it, so I don't know exactly why he had to have it. He's a great sloppy painter, so he spattered paint on it.



[00:45:12.66]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Oh, great. But you did get it back?

[00:45:14.55]

JANET FISH: Oh, yeah. The "Hulk" got it back from him somehow.

[00:45:19.23]

BARBARA SHIKLER: The "Hulk?" [They laugh.] Well, Close in some interviews said that all the Yale students were competitive, but very supportive.

[00:45:28.22]

JANET FISH: Yes.

[00:45:28.86]

BARBARA SHIKLER: And he says, "We demanded more of one another than the faculty demanded of us."

[00:45:33.12]

JANET FISH: Yeah.

[00:45:33.24]

BARBARA FISH: He also said that none of you knew then that you were an exceptional group, although it's been thought later that you all were.

[00:45:40.90]

JANET FISH: I assumed that all school art schools were like that. And it was a real shock to me when I finally, the first teaching job I had to discover that these students really didn't care at all and were very low-energy. Everybody there was full of—it was a very active, energetic time. And it was competitive, though not in the unpleasant sense, at all. I think it was competitive in an exciting sense.

[00:46:08.12]

BARBARA SHIKLER: I'd love to try and reconcile some of that. Well, it seemed like a double whammy that you were getting in some respects, when you were having a tough time with the male painters.

[00:46:25.23]

JANET FISH: Well, you know, you have to keep remembering that this is before any of this had been verbalized or thought out. So a tough time would be sort of integrated into thinking. One would take it personally, rather than generally, usually, what was being said. And so it's a little hard when you're talking, and you're looking back, and so much has happened since. You change the way things were.

[00:46:55.74]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Well, but nevertheless, you felt part of the group, even while you were getting some of that business about being a female, both in your—

[END OF TRACK AAA\_fish88\_3828\_m]

[00:00:06.08]

BARBARA SHIKLER: This is Barbara Shikler. It's side two of the first interview with Janet Fish in her studio loft at 101 Prince Street on January 30. We were discussing how male chauvinism worked at Yale as a student, and whether, in fact, you felt supported as well as isolated. I was curious to know about that, because it must have been very confusing.

[00:00:32.10]

JANET FISH: It's very hard for me to put everything—you know, I mean, I realized later that some of the things that happened happened because of the chauvinism—because I was a very, in some senses, shy and somewhat isolated person—I made friends at Yale. I mean, I'm not saying I didn't talk, period. I had friends. I had a very low self—I alternate between a low sense of self-esteem, probably, and some kind of stubbornness and belief in myself, that kind of conflict that was never quite resolved, because I did totally believe that I could do whatever it was I had decided to do.

[00:01:23.52]

But I had friends there, and I didn't know—Chuck, for instance, I became much friendlier with later when we both lived in the same building. I didn't know those people that well. The people I knew actually were some real oddballs around there. There was an Iranian painter named Farman Farmaian, and this kind of very eccentric crowd of people that were around him. And some of them were—not everybody was a painter. Some people were musicians, or writers, and things. Some of the people students at Yale, and some people weren't.

[00:02:10.26]

BARBARA SHIKLER: I see. When did you share a loft with Chuck Close? Was that at Skowhegan?

[00:02:16.53]

JANET FISH: No, I didn't share a loft. We lived in this building. This floor used to be Chuck's floor.

[00:02:21.51]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Oh, here at 101 Prince Street. I see.

[00:02:23.97]

JANET FISH: Yeah. Here at 101 Prince. And I had bought Jack Beal's loft right downstairs, and Chuck and Leslie were my near neighbors for a number of years, so that I really got to know him a great deal better here.

[00:02:36.63]

BARBARA SHIKLER: I see. There was some discussion in one of those things written about you in that period that there was a separate studio area where some of the painters worked separate from the larger group, I think Close and Serra.

[00:02:55.35]

JANET FISH: They went over to another building. Yeah, they were in another building away from Street Hall. The Street Hall wasn't really big enough. And so they had a whole kind of separate relationship, being together there. I think Steve Posen—I'm not sure. I think he might have been over there too. So it took them a bit out of my experience of the people I was with. I knew—really, let me think. There were so many people—like Rackstraw was around; Farman and—Rackstraw Downes and some of—just sort of different cliques, probably.

[00:03:41.13]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. When did you become close to the separatists, to Serra and Close and that gang, so-to-speak? While you were there? Or become involved with them and their work?

[00:03:54.48]

JANET FISH: I remember Richard particularly because of just sitting around that—all this kind of conversation and stuff, sitting in the bars there, you know. And Close, I'm not sure—I don't know that I was particularly close—

[00:04:16.53]

BARBARA SHIKLER: To Close. [Laughs.]

[00:04:17.04]

JANET FISH: —to anyone. To anyone. That's not—I mean, really, I lived in a rooming house, and I got to know the people there, kind of. But I don't know what's happened to those people that were in the school.

[00:04:43.27]

BARBARA SHIKLER: I'm curious to know, when you began your, I think, flower paintings, or the first time you began seriously to explore—

[00:04:50.26]

JANET FISH: Well, when I came back from Skowhegan, I couldn't paint the landscape anymore, so I set up a lot of dead flowers in a kind of landscape space, and decided to paint them that way. And that was—it must have been right towards the end of the time when I was there, maybe—I mean, to try and pin down when I was at Skowhegan, because I think I might have had one more year or something after that.

[00:05:12.01]

Anyway, it seemed to be the end of the conversation about my criticisms I got, which must have been something I wanted, because I remember Esteban Vincente would come over, and he'd look in, and there, I'd be sitting painting these flowers. And all he'd say is, "I have a stomachache today. I feel sick." And I'd say, "Well, have you taken a pill or something?" And basically, I got—then I sort of ceased to get a lot of this kind of feedback, the serious critical attention, let's say. And apparently, I liked that, I guess. [Laughs.]

[00:05:52.70]

BARBARA SHIKLER: You did. You did. That's interesting that you didn't feel more isolated or more depressed.

[00:05:59.06]

JANET FISH: Well, no, I just sort of felt—

[00:06:00.05]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Was it an affirmation in a sense?

[00:06:01.67]

JANET FISH: No, I just felt irritation sometimes, or something, you know. See, I had a belief in painting itself, that it was possible to do good painting, that painting was a valuable thing to do, and I had this kind of idea in my head that painting was—that there was great art, and that painting, that one could make great art. So that, sometimes, the stuff that went on around was only incidental to an interest in painting that I had.

[00:06:39.20]

BARBARA SHIKLER: What did you perceive as great art? Do you remember what you—

[00:06:42.68]

JANET FISH: Well, just from generally from looking back, looking at the painting that had been done in the past, and I also believed that the painting that was being done was great—contemporary painting that was great, that those people like de Kooning were great artists, too. This was also in my belief system. I accepted the idea that that was something that existed, and that it was possible to do this, and that it was a fine thing to do. So this attitude being in my head, it sometimes was the predominant attitude, rather than anything that somebody might say to me about my work.

[00:07:27.38]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Well, when you were doing those flower paintings—I don't know why it sounds like a pejorative term when it's a wonderful term, but, for some reason, every time I saw it referred to that, it had little quotes around it, "little flower paintings." [Laughs.] What were they like, the earliest?

[00:07:42.32]

JANET FISH: They were painterly. There were a lot of the ideas that I had learned, really, from trying to paint the—abstract paintings were certainly there. You know, that was an interest in paint, and trying to grasp the ideas about color.

[00:08:00.17]

BARBARA SHIKLER: What did you want color to do in those paintings? What were you reaching for? When you did the flowers, certainly, it was because you—

[00:08:07.18]

JANET FISH: When I did the flowers, I was trying to define painting for myself so that I wasn't reaching to paint a flower. I was trying to define painting for myself by painting what I saw. And I was trying to do a great many things that one would have to try to do as a student. I was trying to learn to paint. I was trying to paint clearly. I was trying to get a control of my medium. I was trying to understand what color could do. I was trying to get a mastery of my hand, and just to be able to make a mark, and put it where I wanted to. And then there was also the decision about where to put the mark and how to do that.

[00:08:47.78]

And that had to be thought out, and I decided to feel it out rather than pick up on—and rather than take an idea from someone else, I wanted to find out what painting meant to me. So the only way I could do that was to paint paintings, and then keep them up, and paint another painting and then think to myself what I hated and what I liked, and try always to work. What I did for many years then was to work from painting to painting and try and push what I defined as good in the work, and try and eliminate what I had decided was bad. And the criticism I got, either from my friends or from the teachers, was relevant to trying to figure out what it was good or bad in the particular painting.

[00:09:37.46]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Irrelevant, did you say?

[00:09:38.75]

JANET FISH: It was relevant.

[00:09:39.72]

BARBARA SHIKLER: It was relevant.

[00:09:40.32]

JANET FISH: It was relevant, but also something not to be swallowed whole. One of the things, I think, that you do learn in art school is how to handle criticism. And criticism comes from a particular viewpoint. Each person who speaks to you—and one good thing about having so many different viewpoints was that it was very clear that one person would like one kind of thing, and another person would like another kind of thing, and also, that some people would be totally blind to some of the things you were doing, and only see things that related to their work. And some people also had a broader vision than others.

[00:10:15.39]

This is something you saw from having so many critics, so that you began to be critical of the critics, and see that there were things to be said and things to learn, but that it had to be done with intelligence, that one had to think about those things. There wasn't a right and there wasn't a wrong. That was the greatest thing, I think, that we got from that particular time at Yale—where before there was a particular right or wrong established, we had to figure that out for ourselves, which meant that everybody who was there came out painting,

in the end, so differently.

[00:10:55.62]

BARBARA SHIKLER: And yet, at the same time, you were still sensitive to a kind of rejection on the part of some of your teachers.

[00:11:03.25]

JANET FISH: I always knew it. I always knew when I was being rejected, and I took it personally. Later on, I saw that some of what was happening really did have to do with just attitudes towards me as a woman, or you know—and I could see that some of these—and I sometimes—I mean, without thinking too hard about it, one is sometimes aware that one was being condescended to. And the people who acted that way, the people who flirted with the women students, and who saw them really as people to be flirted with, some of those teachers were laughed at a great deal, because they were always trying to date students, and the student would come back from going on a date, and she'd tell all the rest of us, and then everybody compare experiences and have a good laugh—

[00:11:52.44]

BARBARA SHIKLER: That's so funny.

[00:11:53.60]

JANET FISH: And having stuff like that going on. I mean, this was completely the way things were done then.

[00:12:01.65]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Yeah. I don't know if it should be off the record or not, but the times that I've seen Esteban—I think he is, in general, as an old Spanish grandee, not very interested in the opinions of women. [Laughs.]

[00:12:17.52]

JANET FISH: Yeah. And when someone is giving you very little respect, sometimes, you give very little respect in turn—

[00:12:26.28]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Which, in fact, creates a more of a schism.

[00:12:29.07]

JANET FISH: Yeah.

[00:12:30.24]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Could I interrupt you—I just want to backtrack for a moment for definitions and terminology, because I think that's ultimately helpful, too. Early on, when you were responding to the last question, you spoke about the mark. And this is a word that comes up very often. And I think it might be interesting to explore it as a term, if you would, as opposed to a stroke, and the function of the mark in your mind on the canvas.

[00:13:00.66]

JANET FISH: Well, the mark gives a vitality to the canvas. Instead of having a smooth skin to the canvas, the mark means that there's a kind of activity, that the paint is being—when you're working with paint in a fluid way and making marks, and the marks remain as paint marks, it shows, then, the movement of the hand or the arm, or the way the paint is put on, is an important part of the message. Anything that's on the canvas that can be seen is part of the message of that canvas. So when a mark is there, it's part of what that canvas can say.

[00:13:46.56]

BARBARA SHIKLER: A kind of an instruction as well to the viewer, if you will. "Look here, look there."

[00:13:49.59]

JANET FISH: Well, the mark creates a form, and defines a form, and the quality of the paint, the way the paint is put on, the kind of color, all those things are part of what someone unconsciously reads when they come to a painting.

[00:14:06.57]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Or consciously, at times.

[00:14:08.19]

JANET FISH: Yeah.

[00:14:08.37]

BARBARA SHIKLER: You have a painting—I was going to talk about it later, but the painting called "The Apple." And the title itself suggests to the viewer that he or she find the triangle tip up at the top, because it is sitting right there and, in a sense, you engage your viewer by that sort of thing.

[00:14:32.25]

JANET FISH: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:14:32.30]

BARBARA SHIKLER: I suppose that is a digression which we don't have to explore. Pause?

[00:14:40.63]

JANET FISH: Sure.

[Recorder stops; restarts.]

[00:14:41.70]

BARBARA SHIKLER: We're sort of backtracking a bit about what you just said. And I guess you were saying that all the students talked to one another, but did anybody seem to want to persuade you that you were on the wrong track, among your fellow students? Was there a kind of a dynamic going on?

[00:15:04.76]

JANET FISH: I don't remember at that time, particularly. I mean, because everybody was holding to whatever viewpoint they had rather vigorously at the time, and since viewpoints sometimes changed and things, I don't remember having any feeling of any problem from the other students. I know that there was a kind of interaction among the students that I think was very valuable. We really did look at each other's paintings when somebody's paintings were—we would go around and nose around.

[00:15:42.20]

I remember Tony Phillips was a painter then. He was doing very interesting paintings that people liked, of chairs and things. And he painted extremely slowly. And it was very hard for him to make something. But we always liked to look over there and see what he was doing—or anybody's other—anyone else's paintings, in fact, were of interest. Anything that was happening was of interest, and was thought about, and considered as a possibility, as perhaps that person is on the right track. I mean, there was a lot of questioning about any track you chose to go on.

[00:16:18.47]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Who did you like?

[00:16:20.00]

JANET FISH: Who did I like? I think I was just very—changed my mind all the time. Somebody had one kind of painting. I remember liking Tony's painting, Farman Farmaian made strange constructions that I liked. There was—It's really hard to say anymore because it was all student painting.

[00:16:45.32]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Yes, of course. So your work itself, to get back to what you were describing, your work—were you staying with the flowers and the dried flowers or the withered flowers in the landscape setting?

[00:17:01.01]

JANET FISH: Yeah. Once I did that, and it must have been—I think it has to have been my last year that I started doing those, because I believe they were the paintings I presented for the final jury. So I probably went to Skowhegan the summer before I left.

[00:17:17.15]

BARBARA SHIKLER: What size were you working then? Do you remember?

[00:17:20.81]

JANET FISH: Oh, small. They were small. Yeah.

[00:17:22.58]

BARBARA SHIKLER: They were little flower paintings.

[00:17:24.86]

JANET FISH: Yeah. [Laughs.] Very small paintings.

[00:17:25.97]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Did you keep them, any of them?

[00:17:27.53]

JANET FISH: Yeah, I think my parents have a few.

[00:17:30.17]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Okay. I was interested in grants and fellowships. Apparently, Close and Serra traveled on a traveling grant to Europe. Did you do any of that? Did you apply for grants or scholarships, fellowships?

[00:17:43.19]

JANET FISH: No, let me see. When I left—now what happened? Oh, I got married to Rackstraw Downes the year—I think the year after I left Yale.

[00:17:59.42]

BARBARA SHIKLER: '64?

[00:18:00.08]

JANET FISH: '64. And he had one more year to go, so we lived in New Haven that year. So I wasn't applying for anything then. And when I tried to get jobs—say, that was when they took the job—I mean, that's when I discovered there was a separate job book, or something—that I wasn't allowed to apply for these jobs.

[00:18:22.46]

BARBARA SHIKLER: You mean as a woman?

[00:18:23.39]

JANET FISH: Yeah, because they didn't want women. They wanted—

[00:18:25.58]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Teaching?

[00:18:26.06]

JANET FISH: Yeah, teaching jobs.

[00:18:28.19]

BARBARA SHIKLER: And you're not talking about Yale, you're talking about general—oh, at Yale?

[00:18:31.55]

JANET FISH: At Yale. Well, going at the last year, when everyone started trying to find jobs for the next year—so, because that was quite a memory, picking up—going up to—I kept going to office to find out whether there were any jobs, and they kept saying no. And then I went in there one time, and one of the guys that was there, I was looking through the—and I said, "What's that?" And he said, "It's a job book." And I said, "Oh, give it to me as soon as you're through." And the secretary came over and took it away and said, "That's not for you."

[00:19:01.02]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Good god. Good god. You must have been enraged.

[00:19:05.31]

JANET FISH: Well, yeah, frustrated is really the word.

[00:19:09.12]

BARBARA SHIKLER: So it was quite overt.

[00:19:10.65]

JANET FISH: Yeah—

[00:19:11.55]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Unspoken but—

[00:19:12.96]

JANET FISH: Oh, it was overt then, because I mean, most the teachers were really men, the teachers at Smith when I was at the school had been men. It was overt. No one ever considered it. It was only later in the '60s, when people started fussing about women's lib that it ceased, and that discrimination became more subtle or hidden. But not then.

[00:19:40.08]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Mm. But you taught at Yale, ultimately.

[00:19:44.34]

JANET FISH: Taught? Oh, many years later.

[00:19:46.41]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Color? Albers' color?

[00:19:47.40]

JANET FISH: I didn't teach at Yale, no. I never taught—I taught the Albers Color Course at



the School of Visual Arts once.

[00:19:56.59]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Oh, I see.

[00:19:56.77]

JANET FISH: Or did I even do that? No, I lectured at Yale once at the invitation of the students and—

[00:20:06.19]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Much later, you mean?

[00:20:07.00]

JANET FISH: Yeah, many years later. Many years later. [Laughs.]

[00:20:10.34]

BARBARA SHIKLER: So you never did crack that at that time.

[00:20:13.30]

JANET FISH: No.

[00:20:13.48]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Did you end up getting a teaching job or any kind of a job during that period?

[00:20:16.93]

JANET FISH: I worked for a psychiatric research project in New Haven, coding psychiatric forms. And then when Rackstraw and I—Rackstraw got a fellowship or something to Penn, the Art Department. I think Neil Welliver had gone to Penn at that point. And I went with him to Philadelphia, and I had a job selling cards in the museum. And then Rackstraw and I divorced, and I went to New York.

[00:20:46.36]

BARBARA SHIKLER: When was that?

[00:20:47.59]

JANET FISH: That would have been—I was married to Rackstraw I think two years.

[00:20:51.77]

BARBARA SHIKLER: So we're talking about '66, or such.

[00:20:53.45]

JANET FISH: Probably around then, '65 maybe. I think '65—I think I went—maybe I went to New York before we got divorced, or something.

[00:21:00.38]

BARBARA SHIKLER: It must have been scary as hell to come to New York on your own.

[00:21:04.13]

JANET FISH: Well, I came, and I shared an apartment first with this woman and another woman uptown, and that lasted for about three months, I think.

[00:21:17.39]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Other painters, you mean?

[00:21:18.69]

JANET FISH: No, they weren't. The woman who had run the psychiatric research project [laughs] and this other woman. And then the other person was nuts and was bringing strange men home. So it was too dangerous to stay in that apartment, so we all broke up. And I went down and got an apartment down on the Lower East Side. And what happened there? And then I had to leave that apartment because this guy kept breaking into my place and stealing my curtains. And then he stole my canvas, so I couldn't make any more curtains. And I kept trying to figure out—he found more and more ways to break into the place. I think he even drilled a hole through the wall.

[00:22:06.98]

BARBARA SHIKLER: What did you have for your curtains?

[00:22:10.10]

JANET FISH: I pasted bits of colored paper up in the windows finally. I think it's the '60s—I think I did psychedelic patterns. [Laughs.]

[00:22:16.85]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Did you ever know who that was?

[00:22:18.42]

JANET FISH: I never quite figured it out, but it was one of those old little walkups. And the people next to me one side were whores and the other side were junkies.

[00:22:29.12]

BARBARA SHIKLER: God—paranoid city itself.

[00:22:34.31]

JANET FISH: Yeah. So then I moved down to a loft downtown on Jefferson Street.

[00:22:40.67]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Well, I'm curious to know, during that period then, how you lived and whether you painted at all? Did you get a chance?

[00:22:48.75]

JANET FISH: Oh, I painted. I went to a part-time job agency. And I would get part-time jobs. I couldn't type, and I couldn't spell, so a lot of good jobs were closed to me. So I got jobs—it was a really very hard time, and it wasn't that—I wasn't very happy for quite a while. I didn't know too many people at that time, coming to the city. I knew a few people, but not many. And I worked—I painted damaged soap for Bloomingdale's. I painted it with food coloring. And I worked as a pediatrician's assistant and caught every disease that they had. [Barbara laughs.]

[00:23:32.89]

And I don't know, I can't even remember—I worked in a real estate agency, and I got fired for writing a letter spelling Rhode Island R-O-A-D—[They laugh.] Just different jobs like that. Farman was in town, and he and a couple of other artists were making—sort of helped this guy, Casey Lee, design a restaurant. And I met Casey with Farman and those people. He was a Chinese millionaire who liked to dance on top of the bar a lot. He's a little short guy, and he liked tall blondes. So once he had his restaurant, by that time I'd moved down to Jefferson Street, Casey would—whenever I came into the restaurant, he would know how I was living, and he figured—and rightly—that I wasn't eating well. So he would always send a steak to the table if I sat down.

[00:24:35.60]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Oh, lovely.

[00:24:36.89]

JANET FISH: Or he'd come and sit at the table and leave a bottle of brandy or something.

[00:24:42.23]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Thank God for people like that.

[00:24:43.88]

JANET FISH: Yeah. [Laughs.]

[00:24:44.42]

BARBARA SHIKLER: They pepper the history books occasionally. Lovely, very sweet. Well, that must have been so rewarding. I should think that moments like that gave you some kind of feeling that not all was—

[00:24:56.72]

JANET FISH: Miserable.

[00:24:57.30]

BARBARA SHIKLER: —rough going.

[00:24:58.01]

JANET FISH: Yeah, well, that was fun. And when I lived on Jefferson Street, there wasn't any heat and stuff. And around then was when I started painting all the vegetables and things. And so I had some friends in Hoboken. I used to go over there for a bath. And they would keep a towel and a toothbrush for me. [Laughs.] I would call up, and I remember calling up, and inviting them to dinner, and they'd say, "Well, what are you painting this week?" And I would say, "Well, turnips," and they'd say, "Well, we'll pass. We'll wait until next week." [They laugh.]

[00:25:33.98]

BARBARA SHIKLER: You mean you'd come armed with whatever vegetables you were painting?

[00:25:39.05]

JANET FISH: Yeah.

[00:25:39.26]

BARBARA SHIKLER: So you were into vegetables by that time?

[00:25:41.81]

JANET FISH: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:25:44.60]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Were you working only in oils at that point?

[00:25:49.11]

JANET FISH: I was working in oils. And Neil Welliver—I think that last year, when Rackstraw was still going to Yale, I was over at Neil Welliver's studio, and he was throwing out a box of pastels. So I took the—it was a big shoe box of pastels, and I was carrying them around with me for a while, and then I cleaned them up. So I started using some pastels as well.

[00:26:13.62]

BARBARA SHIKLER: That must have been an exciting new feeling for you.

[00:26:17.21]

JANET FISH: Not sure if it was exciting, but it was interesting. [Laughs.]

[00:26:19.62]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Yeah, well, they have such a different—they have such a different feel going on than paint.

[00:26:25.68]

JANET FISH: Yeah.

[00:26:26.58]

BARBARA SHIKLER: I find that that's kind of fun.

[00:26:30.63]

JANET FISH: Yeah.

[00:26:30.87]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Well, we got to Jefferson Street, but before we do, I have a note that you learned about color—more about color in a—working in a paint shop than you did from all the courses you took.

[00:26:43.08]

JANET FISH: Oh, right. Yeah. [Laughs.] I worked at Arthur Brown and sold paint. A lot of people—a lot of people worked there. I can't remember if it was Sylvia, I think might have worked there—Sylvia Mangold. I'm not positive—other people that had been at Yale that had passed through there. I think that's probably how I heard about the job. And so you could get things at a discount—I mean, sometimes a greater discount than you might believe. And I remember putting a whole bunch of watercolors in a box and taking it up to the watercolor counter, and the guy behind the counter closing the box and charging me for the box. [Laughs.]

[00:27:23.11]

BARBARA SHIKLER: That's fabulous. That's fabulous. And did you work in watercolor?

[00:27:27.16]

JANET FISH: So, no, I didn't work in watercolor. I was thinking about it. I didn't work in it. I carried the watercolors around for years. I think I've still got them because I think I might have made one or two, and it didn't work for me at the time.

[00:27:42.67]

BARBARA SHIKLER: What didn't please you about it? Texturally, or the control, or lack of it?

[00:27:46.96]

JANET FISH: It was too unmalleable. I like the pastel because you could change everything. But the watercolor—you were stuck with the mark once it was made. And for what I was trying to do, which was to keep searching out the image and figuring out my ideas—watercolor is better for when you've got it all clear in your head. And it's not as flexible a medium.

[00:28:13.34]

BARBARA SHIKLER: When you were involving the mark, was that something that was stressed at Yale?

[00:28:18.76]

JANET FISH: I think mark-making was something that was talked about—I mean, certainly

part of the kind of Abstract Expressionist painting—the placement of the paint, and the size of the brush, and how that changed the image and the kind of layering of paint, and how that changed the space and the color, how color moved in space. All of those issues were part of the abstract painting. And I took a lot of those general ideas to the image.

[00:28:49.46]

BARBARA SHIKLER: What was your work like then at that point?

[00:28:52.97]

JANET FISH: When I first got to New York?

[00:28:54.74]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Yeah.

[00:28:54.89]

JANET FISH: Well, I decided that I—

[00:28:56.30]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Your vegetable period?

[00:28:57.90]

JANET FISH: I started with the vegetables because I decided that every time I tried to paint something solid, that it wasn't interesting, and that I ran into a wall, that I couldn't handle it. I couldn't paint it. So I decided to paint—I think I started out painting just sheets of paper with eggs on them, and I just set that up as a problem to try and paint eggs, potatoes, apples, just scattered across the field to paint volume until it would work.

[00:29:27.74]

And then I started blowing those paintings up. I decided to eliminate everything except what I was interested in. I kept looking at the paintings, as I said, working from one painting to another. And I said, I don't want the table top. I don't want to suggest any other world. It's just the object now. I'm just going to focus on that and a kind of solid volume. And I think maybe, probably even from working with Leonard Baskin, before I had some ideas about an image having a presence. And I decided that these images would have a physical presence, and push forward from the painting rather than go back and be the quality of the paint.

[00:30:12.88]

BARBARA SHIKLER: When you chose to do that, did you use, as a reference, any other painters? Did you have something in mind?

[00:30:22.27]

JANET FISH: No, I was not trying to work from other painters at that point. That was really the reason for working from life, was to avoid—I had a lot of contact with art by that time, and with art theory, with art ideas. And I wanted to shut that out and re-explore things more directly. So I wasn't looking. I didn't know, initially, when I was starting to do that, I really didn't know too many people. So the artists that I first knew weren't working figuratively. They were working in other ways.

[00:31:06.20]

I got to know—I can't even think who I knew first. Well, Farman. And I don't know, I sort of ran into people. I didn't even know that many artists when I was first there. Through Casey, I started to go out with different people, but they were writers a lot, or musicians. I met a few Abstract Expressionist painters. I mean, I was young. I was one of those girls in the Cedar Bar that was in back of the guys—whoever met them. So I met, really, more writers, I think.

[00:31:41.58]

BARBARA SHIKLER: They were less chauvinistic in their response, were they?

[00:31:44.97]

JANET FISH: No, they were very chauvinistic, you know. But writers were fun to talk to, I guess.

[00:31:50.85]

BARBARA SHIKLER: What size were you working in? Was that changing?

[00:31:54.38]

JANET FISH: Yeah, I started to increase the scale in order to expand the size of the mark and the kind of expanse of the paint. And I kept increasing the scale until I got the kind of movement in the paint that I wanted as I was painting the objects.

[00:32:10.86]

BARBARA SHIKLER: What size are we talking about, generally?

[00:32:13.36]

JANET FISH: Probably about five feet, some of them.

[00:32:16.27]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Courageous—very courageous. It seems to me a combination of a naïve and a super-intellectual working simultaneously. [They laugh.]

[00:32:26.86]

JANET FISH: Probably, yeah. And then, after a while, as I was working on those things, I remember people kept saying—Let me see, I think it was Tony Phillips was in there, and he was teaching at School of Visual Arts, and he kept saying, "Oh, you've got to meet this guy Don Nice. He's painting large things, you know, like odd-sized objects and things." And so I kept hearing this, but never meeting him, never seeing his work or anything. Don Nice had been at Yale, but I think he was a little bit older or something.

[00:33:00.44]

BARBARA SHIKLER: I'm not sure how you spell his name. Could you?

[00:33:02.29]

JANET FISH: N-I-C-E.

[00:33:03.19]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Oh.

[00:33:04.12]

JANET FISH: And so I'm finally—some job came up at Visual Arts, and I was very ill, and Tony, I think, called up and said, "Send in your resume right away." And I was too—I was delirious. I was so sick. And so I said, "I can't remember what I've done." And so Tony said, "I'll write it out for you." So he wrote it up. He said, "We've had the same training, so I'll write out your resume." So he wrote out this resume, and years later, I had a glance at it, and it's total fantasy. Tony just worked out a resume and sent it in. And I got it. I got this a night job teaching.

[00:33:45.57]

BARBARA SHIKLER: What a dear thing to do.

[00:33:46.74]

JANET FISH: Yes, indeed.

[00:33:48.43]

BARBARA SHIKLER: That's a definition of friendship.

[00:33:51.42]

JANET FISH: And I saw—

[00:33:52.44]

BARBARA SHIKLER: When was that you were working, when you got that job?

[00:33:57.94]

JANET FISH: Hard to remember. Well, when I was in my late 20s, whatever—because I was teaching—I got married for a second time, and I still had a teaching job, so I didn't teach too many years. And I got divorced when I was about 30 or 31, so it was probably late 20s.

[00:34:20.31]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Do you feel like giving us the name of your second husband?

[00:34:23.61]

JANET FISH: Ed Levin. It's a matter of record somewhere. [Laughs.]

[00:34:28.98]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Okay.

[00:34:29.22]

JANET FISH: And he's a labor arbitrator. So I saw Don's paintings, so that was some kind of contact with someone who was working along similar lines. And also, when I was—let me see who else. I joined a—that would all have been around '60—Amazing how you lose the thread of all of this. But there was a co-op gallery, Ours, that we—I got to know a few other people around there. I really got to know people in New York, other artists, actually, when I joined the co-op gallery. Before that, I really hadn't known too many people.

[00:35:21.59]

But I ran into Paul Shankel, who'd been at Yale. And he and a bunch of other people were making a co-op gallery. And then that group called Ours, and he asked me if I wanted to join. And that's when I really began to get to know other artists. So in that gallery—Frank Viner was in the gallery and Diane Karol, who had been at Yale. Those three people had been at Yale. And that was kind of a terrific thing, because—then Leo Bates was another person. Anyway, we took Leo's loft, and there was a lot of heavy machinery in one half of the loft. We carried the machinery out and painted it up—it was over on Grand Street—and cleaned it out and did the wiring, had some shows, and had terrible fights.

[00:36:16.65]

BARBARA SHIKLER: [Laughs.] How many shows did you have?

[00:36:18.66]

JANET FISH: Each of us managed to get one show in before the gallery folded. But there was a lot of community, because everybody helped each other hang the show. Each of us helped the next person. And Frank Viner was a lot of fun. He's a very funny guy. He's a set designer now and does some painting, but he does more set design now. He was a very talented sculptor at the time and he—very terrific imagination. So we all sort of palled around, and then through going around with those guys to the bars and things, I ran into other artists and became part of that kind of whole scene with the bars and artists hanging out and things.

[00:37:08.55]

BARBARA SHIKLER: I'm going to make a note to go back to that, but I was just—other artists

—I was interested to know the dates—how long Ours lasted.

[00:37:21.78]

JANET FISH: Ours Gallery lasted one year. Then—

[00:37:23.79]

BARBARA SHIKLER: One year. But before you get to Mercer, which I gather you're going to go to next, but I was curious to know when you chose a co-op, had you gone through a lot of gallery searching?

[00:37:36.39]

JANET FISH: No. I really didn't think that I would get a gallery, and rightly so. [Laughs.] And I didn't feel ready to look for one either. But the co-op was a good way of showing—I showed these paintings of packages I'd done at Ours, packages of vegetables and things. So some of the other people were actively looking for galleries. Co-ops really were not the thing to do at that point. And I remember going into some bar and this guy screaming at us that we were absolute assholes for signing this co-op—that co-ops were vanity galleries, and look at what had happened to 10th Street, because 10th Street had really fallen downhill by then and was considered just a vanity place or something.

[00:38:26.86]

BARBARA SHIKLER: I think it's always had to struggle with that image today. It seems to be—artists who don't have galleries seem to be so resistant to making a co-op again.

[00:38:37.63]

JANET FISH: Well, then, for a brief time, co-ops after that really had a fling, you know. So what we did after Mercer Street—I mean, then some of us went to Mercer Street.

[00:38:51.01]

BARBARA SHIKLER: 55 Mercer?

[00:38:51.94]

JANET FISH: 55 Mercer. It had been going for about a year, I think. And so when it—people who were in 55 Mercer were a more mature bunch of people.

[00:39:02.77]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Did you sell at Ours?

[00:39:05.69]

JANET FISH: Somebody bought a painting. I think I sold one painting, maybe.

[00:39:14.81]

BARBARA SHIKLER: It must have been a thrill. Your first sale, was it?

[00:39:18.44]

JANET FISH: No, I can't remember what was my first sale. I think maybe Miyoko Ito might have been one of my first sales, because she's a Chicago painter, and I was at MacDowell Colony, and she bought a pastel from me.

[00:39:35.93]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Was MacDowell before this?

[00:39:39.02]

JANET FISH: I think so. I think MacDowell—[Laughs.]



[00:39:41.36]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Here we go. [Laughs.]

[00:39:44.01]

JANET FISH: I believe I was at MacDowell in '67 and '68, so it might have been that—

[00:39:48.35]

BARBARA SHIKLER: But you were there three times, as I recall, weren't you? Three times?

[00:39:53.87]

JANET FISH: [Laughs.] Should have interviewed me a few years earlier. I can't—[Laughs.]

[00:39:58.28]

BARBARA SHIKLER: I tell you, I have it somewhere at home, so I'll check it out. I'll let when you were in MacDowell. [They laugh.]

[00:40:04.86]

JANET FISH: Yeah, I'm not very good on dates.

[00:40:09.98]

BARBARA SHIKLER: But goodness, there's so much to talk about. Let's remember to come back to 55 Mercer and go for a minute to MacDowell—and tell me how much time you would spend there at a clump, and whether it was productive.

[00:40:26.42]

JANET FISH: Well, a good question, though, when was I at MacDowell—maybe Miyoko's buying the painting was not the first painting I sold.

[00:40:36.35]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Why do you say that?

[00:40:37.37]

JANET FISH: Because I might have gone to MacDowell after I was in the co-op gallery. I'm just trying to remember. I did go a couple of times, and the one time I would have been painting packages and things, and one time, I think I was painting jars, which is sort of the only way I can kind of place it in time.

[00:41:01.75]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Well, when I come back, we'll stick in the dates here.

[00:41:06.87]

JANET FISH: That's right.

[00:41:07.20]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Did you find that a productive thing? So many people respond differently to colonies. Some feel on the spot or—

[00:41:14.94]

JANET FISH: They were terrific for me. No, it was great being at the colony. I was being fed. I didn't have to work. I had this wonderful place in the country. I was still pretty lonely, and it's a community. So it was wonderful being there.

[00:41:31.92]

BARBARA SHIKLER: So you'd work all day in a studio and come in for meals and chat?

[00:41:35.74]

JANET FISH: Yeah. I had a lot of fun there, yeah.

[00:41:37.38]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Were there people there that you remember? This always attracted such an extraordinary mix.

[00:41:43.52]

JANET FISH: Oh, I made some very good friends there—Milton Klonsky, who was a writer, and he and Romulus Linney, who's a playwright—both of those people were very dear friends of mine. And quite a few other people, but those two in particular.

[00:42:08.15]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Okay, well, we're back to 55 Mercer, which was also a co-op, wasn't it?

[00:42:15.05]

JANET FISH: Yes, 55 was another co-op, and a little bit better run. And I had one show there. I showed with Diane Karol, who I'd also been at Yale with. And you had to sit with your show and everything. And around that time, I was trying to find galleries. I went around to quite a few places, and I think I used that show as an opportunity to mail out to different places.

[00:42:43.17]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Were you getting critical attention?

[00:42:45.60]

JANET FISH: No, critics did not go down to the co-op gallery.

[00:42:47.97]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Never.

[00:42:48.39]

JANET FISH: They didn't go until after I left downtown and finally got a gallery uptown, then the critics started to go downtown. Got a little bitter about that. [They laugh.]

[00:42:57.21]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Yeah, a little too late. So 55 Mercer was for—how long you were you there, approximately?

[00:43:05.19]

JANET FISH: I think it was probably a year, because what happened from that show—Jill Kornblee came down to that show, and she pointed at the only painting that was sold, and asked me if it was for sale. And then—

[00:43:21.60]

BARBARA SHIKLER: That's always the case, isn't it?

[00:43:22.80]

JANET FISH: Yes, and then she sort of went "hmpf," and then she sort of wandered out and said, "Well, send me some slides when you have new work." And so I was planning to, but about three months later, I get this call, and it's Jill, and she's saying, "Well, do you or don't you want to show uptown?" So I said, "Well, yes." So that's when I started showing with Kornblee.

[00:43:42.21]

BARBARA SHIKLER: And when was that?

[00:43:43.17]

JANET FISH: I think I started showing with her in 1970.

[00:43:46.50]

BARBARA SHIKLER: And that was a major change, clearly.

[00:43:48.96]

JANET FISH: Yeah.

[00:43:50.19]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Did you feel excited when this happened? What was it—it must have been an enormously profound change, a pivotal point, no?

[00:44:02.58]

JANET FISH: Well, it was great being a gallery. The first show sold out. But my prices were very low, and with the gallery cut and everything, it wasn't enough to live on. So I was still continuing to do different jobs. But the show sold. It was great. I had sold—I had some good luck when I was at Mercer Street. Dorothy Miller brought people from the New York Port of Authority. She sold quite a few paintings to the Port of Authority. And then they came back on their own and bought some more. And so that—I had sold quite well, actually, from the show at Mercer Street.

[00:44:45.38]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Where did they hang your work?

[00:44:47.40]

JANET FISH: It's still hanging—it's hanging in the International Arrivals building, I think.

[00:44:53.93]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Exciting.

[00:44:54.62]

JANET FISH: Yeah, so that was good. So that really helped out a lot, those sales.

[00:45:01.46]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Where were you working—where did you hold jobs? How did you work out your time, painting, working—

[00:45:07.97]

JANET FISH: My time was either I would hold a job, and it would be full-time for a short time, or I'd have a part-time several times a week. Or it might be a couple of days a week, depending. What I did was never take jobs that were full-time, and no matter what that meant for my living situation, because there was no point to working full-time if I was going to be a painter. [Laughs.]

[00:45:35.21]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Indeed, indeed. Visual Arts was over by then, apparently. We never really did get into what you taught there.

[00:45:41.04]

JANET FISH: Oh, I taught drawing, and perhaps I taught color. I taught color somewhere, I'm sure, probably at Visual Arts.

[00:45:52.02]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Was that a year?

[00:45:54.09]

JANET FISH: Yeah. I didn't hang on to jobs very long. I seem to have an ability to destroy—I didn't like a lot of the jobs I had, and so I would sabotage myself and lose the job.

[00:46:05.67]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Sounds familiar. I think I'm going to check out how much tape. I'd hate to lose this. Hang on. Hang on. We seem to be so close to the end, I'd like to stop here.

[00:46:16.11]

JANET FISH: Okay.

[00:46:16.23]

BARBARA SHIKLER: It's the end of the first tape.

[END OF TRACK AAA\_fish88\_3829\_m]

[00:00:06.04]

BARBARA SHIKLER: This is interview number 2 with Janet Fish, January 31, 1988, in her loft, 101 Prince Street. This is Barbara Shikler. Side 1. Janet, we ended up yesterday by talking about your jobs, and you were saying you sort of sabotaged yourself with jobs because you really didn't want to keep them, which, when I consider what the jobs were, is perfectly reasonable. [They laugh.] Also, you hadn't remembered the specific dates of your MacDowell fellowships, and they were 1968, '69, and '72, and I got that information from a review of yours in the *Bermuda Royal Gazette*—

[00:00:50.05]

JANET FISH: Uh-huh [affirmative].

[00:00:50.89]

BARBARA SHIKLER: —which was so praising and full of—

[00:00:53.62]

JANET FISH: Oh, *Bermuda Royal Gazette*. [Laughs.] I'm amazed you found that.

[00:00:56.86]

BARBARA SHIKLER: I did. I found everything. Actually, I got a lot of it from your gallery. But it's quite marvelous, and they talk about all the awards—well, you received a grant from the Australian Council for the Arts to travel and lecture in Australia. That was in 1975.

[00:01:15.07]

JANET FISH: Was that when it was? Yeah. [They laugh.]

[00:01:16.83]

BARBARA SHIKLER: I love it. And you won the Harris Award at the 71st Chicago Biennial.

[00:01:23.71]

JANET FISH: Yeah.

[00:01:24.70]

BARBARA SHIKLER: And since 1970—and this was written in 1985—you've had 26 solo exhibitions. I guess with New Orleans, is 27. Was there another?

[00:01:34.75]

JANET FISH: Oh. Uh—

[00:01:35.20]

BARBARA SHIKLER: There must have been another three—in three years, you must have had—

[00:01:37.95]

JANET FISH: I had one in Toronto this year, yeah. I mean, I don't know. I mean, I've had them. I've had a few at a Texas gallery, and—

[00:01:45.70]

BARBARA SHIKLER: What was your first noteworthy exhibition? The one that really made you feel as though somehow, something special had happened for real?

[00:01:57.43]

JANET FISH: Um, let me see—it's really hard to say. I was thinking, you asked what was the first painting I sold, and I thought—you remember what's important to you, but maybe not what was the first one, and so when I said Miyo Ito bought the painting, and then I thought, Well, Lord knows I could have sold something before that. That was the first important sale.

[00:02:19.08]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Yes.

[00:02:19.41]

JANET FISH: I mean, because she was a painter I really respected. As far as shows go, I suppose that I was most excited about getting into a gallery because that always seemed to be once you did that, your troubles would be over—

[00:02:42.19]

BARBARA SHIKLER: [Laughs.] Yeah.

[00:02:42.80]

JANET FISH: —which is not true.

[00:02:44.28]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Right.

[00:02:45.65]

JANET FISH: So I suppose that that's what counted. I'd been in some other group shows and things, and I was in a show that Harriet Shorr put together at Swarthmore a few years before, but it's just—I don't know. I mean, if it was something that seemed important to me, it was probably the excitement of getting into a gallery.

[00:03:12.02]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Well, most of it's on record anyway, but I think what is wonderful to know are the things that were especially meaningful, because that's really what counts. I have a few more dates for you if you want—

[00:03:25.55]

JANET FISH: Sure.

[00:03:25.73]

BARBARA SHIKLER: —to be reminded, and then that'll lead us to your most recent gallery.

But you started talking about galleries, and in the mid-'60s, you went to Ours, which I gather was very stormy in terms of the relationship—

[00:03:37.82]

JANET FISH: Yeah.

[00:03:38.18]

BARBARA SHIKLER: —between the painters. You likened it to your first marriage [laughs], I gather.

[00:03:41.12]

JANET FISH: Well, [laughs] I mean, everybody is very neurotic, and I suppose everybody freaks out when they're showing, anyway, but I just remember our meeting—I mean, that's why it broke up. I mean, people were just out of control, yelling at each other, and, I mean, sometimes it was very funny. This woman was really yelling at me. I remember sitting at some meeting and I said, "You're getting hysterical." And she stuck her nose right on mine and screamed at me, "I am not hysterical!"

[00:04:11.45]

BARBARA SHIKLER: [Laughs.] God.

[00:04:12.62]

JANET FISH: [Laughs.] I was sitting there thinking, okay, this is proof. [They laugh.] But, I mean, it was still fun to have done it. I'm glad I did it, and I never had any regrets about being in the thing. And then, when I was in the next gallery, of course, we didn't have any stormy meetings like that, and we were much more professional, and probably was a little bit more boring.

[00:04:37.40]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Probably.

[00:04:37.81]

JANET FISH: [Laughs.]

[00:04:38.21]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Yeah, so much is on the line—

[00:04:40.62]

JANET FISH: Yeah.

[00:04:41.12]

BARBARA SHIKLER: —especially in the beginning, and nobody's behind you. You're all sort of out there by yourselves. You were at 55 Mercer in 1970, and then you told us the story about Jill Kornblee. You were there for seven years—

[00:04:54.05]

JANET FISH: Yeah.

[00:04:54.38]

BARBARA SHIKLER: —but you left because it was too small, I gather. Well, for your work, or —

[00:05:00.68]

JANET FISH: I don't know how much I want to get into why I left, but we were having financial troubles, was really why I left. I wanted to be paid for things, and there was—it was

very sloppy.

[00:05:12.31]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Age-old story—gallery dealers who need the—

[00:05:15.22]

JANET FISH: Money.

[00:05:15.68]

BARBARA SHIKLER: —money.

[00:05:16.15]

JANET FISH: Use it to move their gallery and whatever else they want to do with it. And, I mean, I suppose that I can talk about it because it was true with so many other artists that had shown there. They left for the same reason.

[00:05:28.89]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Yeah.

[00:05:29.29]

JANET FISH: It was a very good—I don't want to—it was a very good gallery. She was a very good place to start out, and she had a good relationship with critics and things, and so people came in, and you could get reviewed there. She was very good at building a career, starting out, and she liked to have a sort of, in a weird way, a mother relationship to the artist, and then it almost seemed like when you started to grow up, she had to do something to drive you away. She would pay you in the beginning, and then as soon as you started to make money, somehow the bookkeeping got terrible, and then people left. They would get angry. It took me a long time, because I would have just stayed there forever because I was too—you know, just in fear, and laziness, and everything else. I wouldn't have rocked the boat. But it was good for me that I left.

[00:06:26.70]

BARBARA SHIKLER: It's a classic story, and it's happened with so many painters whose checks never seem to come in when they're paid—

[00:06:34.97]

JANET FISH: The rubber check. I know. I mean, I couldn't stand—you'd get the check, it would bounce three times, and the bank would refuse to look at it again, and you'd waste a day every month trying to collect, and hear different stories every time, and the whole thing. And really, I think it was a needless thing to be happening. I think she had enough money to keep the gallery going on her own without doing this to us, but she did it to other people, too, so I'm sure—

[00:07:02.78]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Sort of self-sabotage in the long run, I guess.

[00:07:04.97]

JANET FISH: That's what I thought it was, because so many good artists had been in the gallery and had left. I mean, Malcolm Morley was there, and I think she had Dan Flavin. I mean, there were all kinds of other people had been shown at that gallery, however briefly. And Rackstraw Downes had the same problem as me.

[00:07:21.35]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Yeah.

[00:07:21.95]

JANET FISH: And so it was sad that this happened. On the other hand, maybe she only wanted to deal with young artists. That's what I think, probably. She liked starting people out, and wasn't so interested in what happened later.

[00:07:38.96]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Well, maybe the complexities of one's personal psychology—you know, needing to be the mother hen and then—

[00:07:44.69]

JANET FISH: Right.

[00:07:45.32]

BARBARA SHIKLER: —not being able to deal with a full-grown child. I don't know.

[00:07:48.32]

JANET FISH: Yeah.

[00:07:48.50]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Well, I guess it doesn't really matter there. There's some funny stories that I made notes about. You went to Ivan Karp, and he told you to clean up your work. Now —

[00:07:59.84]

JANET FISH: [Laughs.] Yeah.

[00:08:00.29]

BARBARA SHIKLER: —what was that?

[00:08:01.48]

JANET FISH: That was when—

[00:08:02.21]

BARBARA SHIKLER: That was before Ours, was it?

[00:08:03.95]

JANET FISH: Yes. No, this was around when I was in Ours, and from being in Ours, I thought, Well, I'm going to go around and start trying to get a gallery. I remember Alex Katz came to the studio, and he said, "Well, why don't you try and get a gallery?" And I said, "I'm really not ready yet," and he said, "Oh, you'll never be ready." So then I started. I went to the different places. I went to Ivan, and he's flipping through my slides about a mile a minute, saying, "Not interested," he says. Then he's flip, flip, flip, flip. He says, "intelligent work," and he goes on, then he says, "I'd be interested if you clean them up, but don't get too close to Estes." It was just around the time, I guess, he was looking around for photorealists.

[00:08:49.31]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative], yes.

[00:08:50.57]

JANET FISH: And yeah, was terrible that time—a whole bunch of artists showing slides, and he was so awful. He pretended not to be himself for a while, which is a nasty little childish joke, and then one guy comes in and slings all of his paintings down the floor, and he says, "Oh, he's straight out of art school." And instead of just saying, "You're not ready yet," he says, "This is uptown showroom stuff—go to an uptown showroom." And then, as the kid walks out, he says, "Look at that jacket—that's a hundred-dollar jacket."

[00:09:22.13]



BARBARA SHIKLER: What a mean thing.

[00:09:23.03]

JANET FISH: And I thought, this is so cruel, and a lot of—I mean, I think all the artists can—this constant barrage of people asking for something, which is what probably dealers get, makes them very horrible, sometimes, to the artists.

[00:09:37.16]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Well, what is the Lord Acton line that's been overused? "Power corrupts —"

[00:09:41.42]

JANET FISH: Yeah. [Laughs.]

[00:09:41.78]

BARBARA SHIKLER: [Laughs.] Absolute power corrupts absolutely.

[00:09:44.63]

JANET FISH: Yeah.

[00:09:45.08]

BARBARA SHIKLER: So there you have it. And Allan Stone, who said that women can't paint. That was—

[00:09:48.57]

JANET FISH: Well, he didn't say it to me. What happened was the secretary—I kept bringing my slides in, and he actually even bought a small painting from me, but then I came trotting back once again with some slides to see if Allan would look, and the secretary says, "Don't bother coming here—he doesn't believe women can paint."

[00:10:07.06]

BARBARA SHIKLER: God.

[00:10:07.51]

JANET FISH: And—

[00:10:09.01]

BARBARA SHIKLER: That was when? Now, that was—

[00:10:10.32]

JANET FISH: That was around the same time, within a couple of years of—before I was at Kornblee, and so in that time when I was looking for a gallery.

[00:10:21.88]

BARBARA SHIKLER: So sometime in the late '60s—

[00:10:23.35]

JANET FISH: Yeah, late '60s.

[00:10:23.68]

BARBARA SHIKLER: —mid-'60s.

[00:10:24.61]

JANET FISH: People said things like that then, and they were freer to say things. And I

always felt bad because somehow I hadn't edited out of the book that Allan Frumkin had had—I had been told that—he came to my studio—and I was told that he didn't believe that women could paint, which is what happened as soon as he had left the studio. The artist who brought him called up and said, "Well, you might wonder what happened, and he's disturbed that you're a woman," and all that stuff. And so then I felt terrible it got into the book and said—because he was upset, but—

[00:11:05.42]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Well, we each have to be responsible for our own statements, in fact.

[00:11:09.26]

JANET FISH: Yeah, but, I mean, of course, he didn't say it to me. This is what I want to put on the record now since it's going on the record.

[00:11:14.21]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Sure, sure.

[00:11:14.30]

JANET FISH: The person who brought him over called to say that, so. But still, I think it was the prevailing attitude—

[00:11:23.06]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Absolutely.

[00:11:23.42]

JANET FISH: —at the time, and that you can't change history, and that so many places now show women—at the time, they didn't.

[00:11:33.08]

BARBARA SHIKLER: I know lots of women who, before the women's movement, raised a few, well, eyebrows and consciousness.

[00:11:41.54]

JANET FISH: Yeah.

[00:11:42.20]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Really had life made so difficult for them that they just simply gave up.

[00:11:46.04]

JANET FISH: Yeah.

[00:11:46.37]

BARBARA SHIKLER: And they might have been equally talented, but perhaps less strong. You clearly had enough self-regard to just kind of slough it off, or throw it off.

[00:11:57.65]

JANET FISH: Yeah. Well, I mean, it's very frustrating at the time, and I think—You know, I think of course, then I think, maybe, about some of these galleries that they may have changed somewhat. [Laughs.] Though I always think the record shows if they're showing women, and if they only have one or two women in the gallery, then you figure that there's a prejudice going on because the work—there isn't a significant difference in quality and work. You cannot tell if you're looking cold, which is very hard to do—to see slides cold without knowing the sex. Usually, even in juries, you always know the names of people, and you always have that attitude.

[00:12:46.45]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Well, it might be an interesting game to play. I don't remember which author it was—was it Doris Lessing who wrote a book under another name and submitted it?

[00:12:56.26]

JANET FISH: Yeah.

[00:12:57.19]

BARBARA SHIKLER: You know, it might be kind of fascinating to switch genders, so to speak, in submitting slides—

[00:13:03.19]

JANET FISH: And see what would happen.

[00:13:04.25]

BARBARA SHIKLER: —and see what would happen. But apparently, even women who were gallery dealers were guilty of this.

[00:13:09.47]

JANET FISH: Oh, yeah.

[00:13:09.59]

BARBARA SHIKLER: There was a Marilyn Fischbach story that, I believe, involved you, in which she, too, felt that women weren't—

[00:13:18.56]

JANET FISH: Well, now, with Marilyn Fischbach, what happened was she came to the studio—I think Alex Katz brought her—and what he actually said—this didn't really have to do with women—it was simply that I remember him saying, "She's a little undecided—get a critic to give her a call and tell her how good you are." Which, I didn't know any critics, so so much for that. I just said, "Oh, Lord, I don't know anyone." [Laughs.]

[00:13:47.96]

BARBARA SHIKLER: But you know what impresses me as you speak, just endlessly—and Alex Katz has been sort of the good fairy, if you'll forgive me using that—

[00:13:56.45]

JANET FISH: He was. He was a good fairy to a lot of us, not just me. I think he would help the different people. I remember he did a lot for Tony Phillips at one point, and I think Frank Viner and Brice Marden, I believe, he was helpful to at one point—at least I heard that. Any other artists, as he wanders around, he'll be interested in some artists, and I remember him walking around when Eric Fischl, I think—and saying that was an interesting artist to look at. He would always be very interested and helpful to young artists.

And also, the other thing—I think that one reason I feel grateful to him is that other people would say they were helping me, but in fact, they never were. They would say, "Oh, I'm going to really—" I'd be looking for work all the time—and they'd say, "Oh, well, if a teaching job comes up, I definitely have got you in mind—I'm recommending you here, and recommending you there." And yet, they actually would never hold me in mind, and not recommend me, whereas Alex Katz never made any promises at all, but you would find out that someone called and said that there's something or the other, and they'd say, "Well, he had recommended."

[00:15:19.64]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Fabulous.

[00:15:21.17]

JANET FISH: So, I thought, this is great—a person who deserves some credit.

[00:15:24.81]

BARBARA SHIKLER: He does indeed. He also put you onto Miller, apparently.

[00:15:28.94]

JANET FISH: Yeah, he suggested Miller. I called him up when I was between galleries and told him I was looking around, and he suggested—yeah, he was someone who—

[00:15:40.04]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Miller was just starting then.

[00:15:41.33]

JANET FISH: Just starting. And I remembered that when Nancy Hoffman started, that he had said that that looked like it was going to be a good gallery. So I thought he had a good instinct, and I really decided to follow through and find out. And then the reason I went to Miller—really, I talked to a number of galleries—was that I felt that—he gave me the feeling that he was interested in my work. A couple of places I felt really were interested in other kinds of work, but thought they could sell my work, and I didn't want to be in that situation. I wanted someone who would be behind my work.

[00:16:20.37]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Yeah. It's not often found. It's not easy.

[00:16:23.88]

JANET FISH: Well, it's not easy, and you never can totally trust it, but one would hardly like to be the artist that was being sold and not respected.

[00:16:34.80]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Oh, absolutely. I suppose some of that had to do with the fact that he himself was a painter.

[00:16:40.71]

JANET FISH: I think so. Also, I think, in some ways, the taste of the kind of work in the gallery, I can see myself fitting in there. I mean, for instance, Sugarman was always one of my favorite sculptors, and he's been showing Sugarman's work, and the kind of Zakantich color, and there are different other people there—Alice Neel.

[00:17:07.73]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Yeah.

[00:17:08.03]

JANET FISH: And then also, Miller is a—that gallery is very friendly to women.

[00:17:13.96]

BARBARA SHIKLER: It's interesting.

[00:17:14.66]

JANET FISH: They're not, I don't think, more than to men, but just treat you with dignity and —

[00:17:25.96]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Yes.

[00:17:26.72]

JANET FISH: —have quite a few women in the gallery.

[00:17:28.46]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Yeah. Well, I guess they seem to be, above all, to all intents and purposes, extremely savvy as far as relationships between collectors and the gallery. That article that was in *The New Yorker*—

[00:17:42.26]

JANET FISH: Oh, yes.

[00:17:42.92]

BARBARA SHIKLER: —which stressed, unfortunately, the chic aspect of it, but it seemed that the underlying mood there was one of enormous attention, constantly, to the careers of the artists.

[00:17:56.27]

JANET FISH: Yeah, I think they do. They're very well organized, and they really don't mess up on things. You're not sitting there saying, "Oh my God, the gallery's just goofed," which I know so many people do. And John Cheim has an absolute talent for—when he puts a catalog together, it's a real art in the way he'll design. I think he designed a very beautiful book for Louise Bourgeois.

[00:18:25.11]

And as far as hanging shows and things, stuff which I've always felt that I had to get over there and make sure was right—and basically, whenever I go over—I mean, what John has decided is much better than—every time I want to change something and add a painting that I thought was being left out, it always turns out that all the reasons were really the best ones. [Laughs.]

[00:18:47.46]

BARBARA SHIKLER: It's very rare, isn't it?

[00:18:48.96]

JANET FISH: Yeah, so that you can really kind of feel very confident.

[00:18:53.34]

BARBARA SHIKLER: So you don't become too involved at this point with trying to run a show yourself as many painters—

[00:19:00.60]

JANET FISH: I always go over, and I'm always there, and they're probably always sorry to see me, but they do such a good job, that I don't really have much reason to—it's just meddling a lot of the times, when I start to change things.

[00:19:17.46]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Are you fussy about pricing? Are you the one who does the—

[00:19:21.06]

JANET FISH: Well, it's really—

[00:19:21.75]

BARBARA SHIKLER: —that makes the decision?

[00:19:25.05]

JANET FISH: When I showed with Kornblee for quite a long—I let her price the things when I went with her. I let her set the prices, because I knew nothing about pricing, and so my prices were very low in the beginning, which I think was very good for me. Other people I've

known have gone in and have charged what they felt their painting was worth, and then nothing sells, and then they get dropped from the gallery. So my price was extremely low, and everything sold for my first show. It was sold out before the reviews came in. But I couldn't live on it. I sold out a show, and I couldn't live on the money I got from it, but it was sold out. It was great.

[00:20:08.23]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Yeah.

[00:20:08.85]

JANET FISH: And then she very modestly and slowly raised the prices, and then at one point, I saw that some other people that I thought were of equal—that had an equal attention with similar kind of work to mine—their prices were a bit higher than mine, and I went in and talked to her about it. So she was very nervous, but she decided to raise the price up. It was a sizable jump up to be on a par with those people, and we got away with it. [Laughs.]

[00:20:49.95]

BARBARA SHIKLER: That's a very modest way of putting it, I think.

[00:20:52.68]

JANET FISH: Yeah. But there was always this thought of not making your prices so high that you've lost everybody.

[00:20:59.61]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Sure, sure.

[00:21:00.72]

JANET FISH: And also, you have to watch out, because interest fluctuates and you don't want to price yourself—a lot of people go very fast, very high, and price themselves out of the market, so we were always very cautious. Then, when I went to Miller, they really make more price decisions. They've raised prices sometimes, and I've been uneasy about it, because, well, I started doing watercolors and I thought it'd be nice to have a low-priced—something that was—

[00:21:38.17]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative], yes.

[00:21:39.85]

JANET FISH: —but they made the prices very high. I said, "my God," but it didn't seem to make any difference. So, I mean, they have a sense—now I basically leave it to them, because I think they know how people are reacting when they're coming into the gallery. I don't see any of that. They would know if people were hesitant, or how people were acting about it.

[00:22:08.46]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Well, clearly, they're enough involved with their collectors, both socially and in business, that they know what they're doing. They know who they're dealing with, I guess.

[00:22:17.90]

JANET FISH: Yeah.

[00:22:18.63]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Do you get involved with that entertaining side of things there?

[00:22:22.23]

JANET FISH: I've never done much entertaining. Though I am no longer the shy person I was in my twenties, I am, in some senses, that I really have a hard time relating to people I don't know well, so I've not done the kind of career entertaining that I should have. And I'm glad that I have a gallery that does that, and both my galleries—I mean, Kornblee was a good entertainer, and I think Miller is, too—because this is something I'm not good at.

[00:22:58.86]

BARBARA SHIKLER: So you go there to those parties, those dinners?

[00:23:01.56]

JANET FISH: I've gone to some, but I'm not asked a lot. [Laughs.] I basically—no, I don't really socialize heavily in a career, where I've thought that it was probably a mistake, maybe. Yeah.

[00:23:17.13]

BARBARA SHIKLER: It doesn't seem as though you've made too many mistakes, though, in fact, because you're working, you're working well, and you're selling, and you're certainly critically approved of. I was looking back at some of your reviews, and even in the beginning, if there was some question about this or that, essentially, you were granted respect immediately for your effort.

[00:23:39.69]

JANET FISH: I think one of the things that happened was because I didn't show straight out of school, and it took a while—that was a while from—was it '63 to '70 when I had that show, whenever it was, at Kornblee? I really had developed my work by the time I showed, so. And it was good, too, because there's a couple advantages.

[00:24:02.55]

I knew what I was doing. I had gone through not having any attention at all, or negative attention, if any, from people who dropped in. And I had gone through it, so I felt very strong about what I was—I mean, I knew what I was doing and why, and so when I got a bad review or something, it would not really relate to what—if the review didn't relate to what I was doing, what I perceived as what I was doing, it just wasn't effective in the end. I think I had a strength from that, of knowing where I was going. I couldn't be shaken by praise, either, which is another way. You can be seduced by praise into thinking that you have to keep repeating what you're doing, which I've seen happen to people.

[00:24:51.04]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Yeah. You said once that only students change their work in response to critical attention—

[00:24:57.81]

JANET FISH: I think so, yeah.

[00:24:58.09]

BARBARA SHIKLER: —of one sort or another.

[00:24:59.08]

JANET FISH: Because once you're really following your own path and working alone, all of this just doesn't relate to you. It's sort of exterior. It's a conversation going on around you, but it's usually not appropriate.

[00:25:20.18]

BARBARA SHIKLER: It's not urgent at any rate. Was there ever any kind of critical review, pro or con, that did affect you and perhaps change your way of looking at something?

[00:25:32.33]

JANET FISH: No. I think what happened—my whole thing with reviews was to read the thing, and not let it ruin my day more than one day. [They laugh.] You can't help but respond. I mean, you get a good review, you're elated, or a bad review, and you're furious, or at least I am. I'm enraged at the jerk, the idiot—[they laugh]—the person of no taste or intelligence who wrote that thing.

[00:26:00.42]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

[00:26:02.51]

JANET FISH: But I determined that I was not going to have it ruin more than a day, and partly, I've always tried to have a work in progress when I have a show, so that I'm working on some project, not starting anything, or anything else, so I have some continuity through a show, and I don't—so that's also helpful. But the reviews—no, nothing has changed it. You know, I was distressed when I started painting water glasses. I remember somebody saying, Well, everyone's going to compare them to Monet—that's a big mistake. And—

[00:26:42.84]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Yes, to the water lilies.

[00:26:43.68]

JANET FISH: Yes. And goddamn if the word "water" didn't lead the reviewer that year to compare them unfavorably to Monet. And I thought they have nothing to do with Monet—it's not even painted the same way.

[00:26:57.27]

BARBARA SHIKLER: No way.

[00:26:57.57]

JANET FISH: But it's that word, "water," [laughs] which is just how dumb a review can be.

[00:27:03.06]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Oh, often.

[00:27:05.46]

JANET FISH: But I had been forewarned, so I thought, oh well. [Laughs.] Now people sit around, saying, "Why aren't you painting those glasses?"

[00:27:16.20]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Yeah.

[00:27:16.53]

JANET FISH: But at the time, all I can think then is, well, where were you when I was?

[00:27:21.15]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Exactly. It's interesting how often the name Monet comes up—excuse me. [Coughs.] When you were talking about your work dealing with light at different times, you made a very clear point of saying that even though you had grown up in a household where somebody like Voorhees, let's say, might have been very influenced by the philosophy behind Monet, yours was not an Impressionist approach at all.

[00:27:48.23]

JANET FISH: No.

[00:27:48.59]



BARBARA SHIKLER: And so often what I see is that you allow yourself to record the light at each time of the day, but you keep it on the same painting rather than giving us a series of them—

[00:28:00.03]

JANET FISH: Yeah.

[00:28:00.20]

BARBARA SHIKLER: —which is very interesting. Let's take a little break for a second—

[00:28:02.51]

JANET FISH: Okay.

[00:28:03.35]

BARBARA SHIKLER: —and stop.

[Recorder stops; restarts.]

[00:28:10.32]

Then let's continue with that, since we were talking about the decision that you made to record the light in a way that's very unique to you.

[00:28:21.57]

JANET FISH: Let me see—how are we—

[00:28:23.19]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Well, you mentioned something somewhere in that Gerrit Henry book, and in many interviews how you will wait for the light to come at various times of the day.

[00:28:36.93]

JANET FISH: Yeah. Well, I think once I realized through painting those packages and the bottles, and I began to perceive that my real interest was light, and then I began to—really, the reason for painting glass was to totally focus on light, and the glass held the light. But I wasn't—because I was painting things I saw, and I wasn't trying to be a camera, and the painting would represent a long period of time—a month—looking at something often, all day long, or at least half a day, depending on the painting.

[00:29:21.21]

So it's a really long period of time, and what it was was the aspects of light that I saw—light represented far more than light, too, as a kind of energy and vitality. It's really as much painting life as anything else, so that when they—"Still life" always seemed, to me, the wrong word—the word "still"—and "nature morte" has always been the wrong phrase, too, because it's not dead. Things aren't dead, and I've seen that—but the light would be through everything, and energy through everything.

[00:29:56.71]

BARBARA SHIKLER: And so the attempt to capture that, had you, as it were, like a very long—forgive the word—a camera exposure, but an exposure that recorded everything that came in.

[00:30:10.36]

JANET FISH: Yeah. It wouldn't be like an exposure, because there's so much—what I think most people don't realize about so-called representational painting, or painting what you see, is you don't copy nature. You can't copy nature. We're trained to think nature looks like a photograph, but it doesn't even do that. I mean, first of all, selecting what to see, and how far around to see, and all of that, your eye does it all the time, but you're not conscious of it.

[00:30:39.19]

And then all the selections of focusing at something when it's in the shadow or in the light, jumping from light to dark, how far you see, how you're using your eyes as you see. And when you see, you're usually using your eyes rather rapidly all over the place. You don't see like a camera—you're seeing many focuses, and many sides, and all around things, and everything else, so that when you paint things, it's all a choice.

[00:31:11.31]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Well, just as an example, a traditional approach, let's say, is exemplified by Chardin—

[00:31:18.84]

JANET FISH: Uh-huh [affirmative].

[00:31:19.32]

BARBARA SHIKLER: —would take a moment, or a series of moments that were pretty much closed together, at which the light hit an object from one side, and did something from this side, and came out the other side darker, et cetera, et cetera, and in the process, turned the object and gave—

[00:31:39.33]

JANET FISH: Yeah. Well, but I would say that Chardin was involved in volumes and a kind of muted palette, so that he would use light to make a volume, make sort of like a series of statues. It is just a matter of what you want to see. One of the things I always thought there was some truth in the kind of things I read about Japanese and Chinese brush painting, that whole concept of getting the feeling of something, the spirit of something, before you painted it. And in painting the gesture, the different ways of painting grass, and grass in the wind would feel very different, and you would have to feel that in you as you painted it. I think that there's a lot of truth in that—that to make a mark, that the proper expression for something, you have to feel it. And whatever this has to do with light, I think it has to do with the way of describing things.

[00:32:47.06]

BARBARA SHIKLER: It also seems—has something to do with the time in which we live and our values about life, too. It seems to me that you couldn't have been doing this at another time, and yet it's so valid that you see things this way. So sort of a paradigm, as it were, of the object and of life.

[00:33:06.10]

JANET FISH: Yeah. I mean, I remember at different times, people also talking about—you have to paint of your time, or something, and I've always felt you couldn't help it.

[00:33:17.94]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Yes.

[00:33:18.34]

JANET FISH: You are of your time, and whatever you choose to paint in your time is an expression of your time. You cannot avoid doing that. And certainly, my vision is influenced by what I've seen, and what's happened, and what's available to be seen.

[00:33:38.20]

BARBARA SHIKLER: I have a note somewhere that you went back to Europe after not having been there since you were 15.

[00:33:45.72]

JANET FISH: Oh, yeah. That's right. [Laughs.]

[00:33:46.49]

BARBARA SHIKLER: And your response to it was almost electrifying. There were some painters that you loved specifically.

[00:33:54.84]

JANET FISH: Yeah.

[00:33:55.51]

BARBARA SHIKLER: I think Rembrandt is mentioned.

[00:33:58.36]

JANET FISH: Goya.

[00:33:58.90]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Goya—very much.

[00:34:00.19]

JANET FISH: Uh-huh [affirmative]. And, well, de la Tour.

[00:34:03.64]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Yeah.

[00:34:04.06]

JANET FISH: But yeah, it was fascinating to go there. Rembrandt is actually a painter that I hadn't been that interested in here, because I basically knew Rembrandt through the Metropolitan Museum collection, and then the one very beautiful painting of the Polish Rider [in the Frick Collection -Ed.], which I think they now say isn't his, or something, but I think is an incredible painting. Oh, and Caravaggio, of course, I like too. But I wasn't very fond of Rembrandt until I went to the Rijksmuseum, and I said, "Oh my god, those smart Dutch kept all the good paintings." They didn't let go of them. So many people sold off their heritage, and they just have all the best paintings there.

[00:34:47.90]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Yeah.

[00:34:48.56]

JANET FISH: And they don't look the same in reproduction.

[00:34:52.53]

BARBARA SHIKLER: No, they don't.

[00:34:53.18]

JANET FISH: And I was amazed by the painting. And then they're hung so well. "The Night Watch," or now "The Day Watch," was hung in the same room with several other very good paintings of groups—these groups of businessmen and people—those great crowded figure compositions—and it was a wonderful thing, because he was hung with such very good painters, and that painting was so incredibly striking in that context.

[00:35:22.85]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Very powerful.

[00:35:23.51]

JANET FISH: Yeah.

[00:35:24.05]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Very powerful.

[00:35:24.80]

JANET FISH: And that use of the light for drama and things, that was something I had always loved in his painting.

[00:35:33.41]

BARBARA SHIKLER: You love the Dutch, as well, don't you? The cold light you mentioned.

[00:35:36.61]

JANET FISH: Yeah, yeah. The—

[00:35:38.06]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Well, the other Dutch. [Laughs.]

[00:35:39.20]

JANET FISH: Yeah, all the—Vermeer and—yeah, Dutch painting, in general, I have an enormous pleasure in it.

[00:35:46.31]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Did you ever see the "View of Delft?" And that's at the—where is it? The Mauritshuis, I think? Mauritshuis.

[00:35:53.54]

JANET FISH: Oh, yes. Yeah.

[00:35:54.80]

BARBARA SHIKLER: The large landscape of the city itself from the distance, incredible colors.

[00:36:00.14]

JANET FISH: Well, I've always felt very attuned and friendly to that painting, that kind of—well, I think, probably, northern painting, there's a desire for light, whereas in southern painting, there's a desire to get away from light, and to be in dark, cool places.

[00:36:21.86]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Yeah. But I think paintings like the Dutch paintings, for instance, like Ruisdael, always deal with that low, raking light, that—

[00:36:30.31]

JANET FISH: Right, the cloud shadows.

[00:36:32.13]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Yes.

[00:36:32.59]

JANET FISH: And a Dutch kid there once firmly told me that there is always something in the sky, and I said, "Well, you've never been to Arizona." [Laughs.]

[00:36:45.31]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Yeah.

[00:36:45.58]

JANET FISH: But in the sky in the Netherlands, there's always something in the sky.

[00:36:52.36]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Let's pause again.

[Recorder stops; restarts.]

Well, just a little remark you just made about suggestions from dealers, which—

[00:37:01.51]

JANET FISH: Well, it probably goes along the same conversation with criticism and how you take it, and certainly, all I wanted to say about that was that dealers always make suggestions to you. They've usually been fairly polite and careful with me, but I remember Jill once saying, "Oh, you must do another yellow painting, another painting in oil," and I said, "Oh, well, you mean yellow sells?" [They laugh.]

[00:37:29.24]

And then, when my paintings have changed, there's always been consternation. And when I stopped doing—well, when I went to Miller, I guess it must have been an awful shock for him when I suddenly threw in a lot of buildings and things, because he knew the paintings of glass, and so I could hear fear, as he said he hoped I wasn't going to give up on the glass totally.

[00:37:56.96]

But basically, different times people say these things to you, but you just really—you know, it's a fearsome pressure sometimes if someone really lets you know that one thing sells and another thing doesn't. And one of the things I've always wanted to do was, I kept working for a long time after I was selling paintings in order that I would not be dependent on sales, so I wouldn't have that in my mind as I painted. And I've always made sure once I did do that, that I was never in debt, so that if I didn't sell a show, I wasn't going to immediately be on the street and have my life in a disaster, so that I wouldn't take that pressure away.

[00:38:44.04]

BARBARA SHIKLER: And so you wouldn't be forced, then, to do what was then—

[00:38:46.94]

JANET FISH: Well, I have a bad reaction to being instructed that something would be a good idea, when that bad reaction is to refuse to do it, which is as bad as doing it, so then I don't want to hear either response, because I don't want it in my head at all when I'm working, so.

[00:39:09.05]

BARBARA SHIKLER: That's what often happens with children whose parents give them good advice, perhaps at the wrong time, and they go about rejecting it and lose out somehow.

[00:39:18.14]

JANET FISH: Yes. Well, I would reject any advice [laughs], so I don't even want to hear the advice, and I won't spend any time rejecting it. [They laugh.]

[00:39:25.58]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Yes, smart. Very smart. Okay. "Site-specific" is a phrase that comes up so often. So many artists are very concerned.

[00:39:39.95]

JANET FISH: I never think about where it's going to be placed. I paint the things in a place specific to the place I'm painting, so if I'm painting in the country, I think the paintings are different than the paintings I do in the city, but that's not site-specific. I never think of the place it's being put in. First of all, it'll change place. I have no control over the paintings once

they leave my hands, and they just get sold and resold. I don't know where they're going to go.

[00:40:06.69]

BARBARA SHIKLER: You don't follow up on any of them, or, for instance, aftercare? I think of—this sounds like a phrase, like, for a newborn baby, but varnishing, or taking care of the—

[00:40:18.71]

JANET FISH: I didn't varnish in the beginning. When a painting turns up again, if it comes through the gallery, sometimes I think it should be varnished if it hasn't been. Now what I do is whatever paintings are in the exhibition I have, then they all get varnished. I varnish them at the time if they get loaned back for a show if they're around. I always do a big varnishing at every exhibition, of all those paintings. But they have to dry for a while, so they don't get varnished immediately. So I clean them and varnish them when they're going to be in a show.

[00:40:52.33]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Oh, what you're answering is sort of pulling us into something that I think should probably be put in that section where we talk about the very specific—about your materials and your process, but you did mention in the discussion of how you work, that you use acrylic as a sizer rather than the rabbit skin glue.

[00:41:14.73]

JANET FISH: Yeah.

[00:41:14.93]

BARBARA SHIKLER: And there's so much written these days about how it doesn't bind, or it doesn't adhere, or it doesn't merge with the stuff that comes after, and doesn't dry, et cetera, et cetera.

[00:41:25.65]

JANET FISH: Well, I've heard such mixed things. I've been unhappy with the rabbit skin glue. If it gets damp, the painting will lift right off the canvas with rabbit skin glue. I mean, if by some disaster—water—hits the painting. And I saw what had happened with some canvases that had been in a shed at my grandmother's, and all the paint just slid off of them. And—

[00:41:52.10]

BARBARA SHIKLER: You mean—not your paintings, right?

[00:41:53.51]

JANET FISH: Not my paintings—some other paintings—and all the paint was sitting on the ground at the base of the canvases that had been hung from racks, and water had gotten on them. So rabbit skin glue, you see, dissolves. And then also, rabbit skin glue is what's called hydrotropic or whatever. Anyway, it expands and contracts with water, as it picks up water so easily—that causes an enormous amount of cracking, as far as I can see.

[00:42:24.44]

And then the thing with—so I've talked a lot to different restorers, and I don't have any good answers on this, by the way, but what I was told was that acrylic is very flexible in the first years. It gets brittle with age, but it's very flexible at first, and I thought, well, so the ground won't be cracking when it's being rolled, and things.

[00:42:52.82]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative],

[00:42:54.56]

JANET FISH: Then there's a problem of the oil having something to bind to, so for quite a while I've been putting a little bit of pumice powder in the ground.

[00:43:04.13]

BARBARA SHIKLER: And that permits it to bind with the acrylic?

[00:43:06.71]

JANET FISH: It makes a slightly sandy surface. Of course, it's not as slippery and wonderful a surface as you get from sanding it a lot. There are a lot of painters who are working on acrylic ground. I think Philip Pearlstein does, and Rackstraw Downes works on a very slick surface. And I've just been doing a couple of paintings—I didn't add pumice powder to the last two, because I wanted to see—I'm thinking about changing my ground recently to get a less rough mark—and I haven't seen cracking in the painting from the ground in old paintings.

[00:43:49.99]

There were a couple of occasions where it had picked up—the ground—something had been wrong with the way I put ground on, but it was so many years ago, and at the time when I had no money and was just out of school, that—I can't even remember what disastrous thing I might have been doing.

[00:44:06.22]

BARBARA SHIKLER: That made it pick up water?

[00:44:07.59]

JANET FISH: Yeah. It might've been something else.

[00:44:09.47]

BARBARA SHIKLER: You see, I hadn't heard about the—I wasn't concerned at this point about the cracking, but that things don't dry with the acrylic.

[00:44:21.26]

JANET FISH: You mean the oil paint won't dry?

[00:44:22.43]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Yeah.

[00:44:23.74]

JANET FISH: No, my paintings have always dried. That's not a problem. I mean, they would dry—well, maybe I don't paint thick enough to make that a problem.

[Recorder stops; restarts.]

[00:44:38.04]

BARBARA SHIKLER: We seem to be really involved with the talk about process and materials, and that all seems to flow right into some of the questions about how you work. Let's begin with the canvas. How do you prepare it? Although, you more or less said that to us, but—

[00:44:55.38]

JANET FISH: I'm using acrylic gesso—a Liquitex gesso—and I add a little medium and water to it, and put it on, sand it, and then—well, this is what I've been doing—I've been considering changing the ground—and then I sand it, and then the second layer—I used to use about three layers, and I thought the acrylic was getting too thick on the linen, so I cut down the layers, and I sand it. And then the second layer, put pumice powder and a little bone ash into the mixture to make a slight, somewhat sandy surface so that there isn't really any grain of the canvas showing, but there is something for the oil to hold onto.

[00:45:47.89]

I started doing this after I had been told by a restorer that that was the argument against the acrylic ground, was that there wasn't something for the oil to bind to or to hold to. The only thing is, it's hell on your brushes, and also, it makes for kind of rough mark. And then recently, with doing these watercolors, I thought I would really like to have a more fluid kind of mark, so I called up different people to find out what they were doing, and I'm not really convinced of their methods.

[00:46:26.32]

In one, Rackstraw Downes was sealing canvas first with the medium, and then some sanded layers, and then putting medium on again to make a very, very slick surface. And I believe Neil Welliver works on a very slick surface, but I tried one—a kind of slick surface painting—I'm doing a painting on it—and I'm experimenting. I'm going to do a couple of paintings on experimental surfaces just to see.

[00:47:01.38]

And it's a question, I think. I wasn't happy with the way rabbit skin glue ground seemed to be sealing the linen, and maybe there's a trick, maybe, that people used to do that aren't doing now, but I see oil seeping through and staining the back of the canvas on some rabbit skin glue things, and that makes me uncomfortable, so I don't have any answers about—

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[00:00:05.60]

BARBARA SHIKLER: This is side two of the second interview with Janet Fish on January 31, 1988, in her studio at 101 Prince Street, speaking, still, about surfaces and that sort of thing.

[00:00:20.09]

JANET FISH: Yeah. Well, I guess—so as far as that goes, I like to use the things immediately, so that's the advantage of acrylic.

[00:00:32.75]

BARBARA SHIKLER: What do mean you like to use things immediately?

[00:00:34.28]

JANET FISH: Well, basically, with rabbit skin glue, you really—you put some white lead on, and then it should sit. And then I always—you read about the kind of thin over thick—and I've always questioned, well, yeah, and is anyone remembering that white lead ground they put on, and how much oil you have to put in the paint after that? I'm not really sure about it. I suppose if there was someone around who would rabbit skin glue my canvases for me beautifully, maybe I would just have them do it. [Laughs.]

[00:01:07.91]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Yes. I gather that you stretch the canvas three times?

[00:01:10.38]

JANET FISH: I stretch it three times—stretch it and wet it, and then re-stretch it. And that was the—I hate it when it gets floppy like a sail. So I do that, and it sort of, in a sense, sanforizes the canvas so that it's very tight and it doesn't flop around. And I'm very particular about aligning the threads up to the edge so that it stretched absolutely in a rectangle. And that's because I've seen paintings where there had been kind of circular cracks going from the corners. And it seemed to be, as far as I could tell, from the canvases being stretched diagonally, on a rectangle, like whatever you call those shapes. Anyway.

[00:01:53.96]

BARBARA SHIKLER: On warp and the woof? About being violated in some way.



[00:01:56.36]

JANET FISH: Yeah, so that it was an irregular stretching, which would lead the lead it to pull in an irregular way. And when it's that tight, it's fairly easy to key the paintings out. You don't have to key them out too far if they get loose. So it's been particularly important, when I was doing the glasses of water, that the canvases be a perfect rectangle, and if they keyed out, that they would key out evenly. Otherwise, those ovals would twist and cease to read correctly. They've got to read horizontally and vertically, correctly. And if they get keyed out unevenly, the whole painting will be distorted.

[00:02:44.09]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Those glasses have been called one of your most complex works up, until that time.

[00:02:51.53]

JANET FISH: Uh-huh [affirmative]. Yeah.

[00:02:52.70]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Yeah. What's your next step?

[00:02:57.98]

JANET FISH: Then—

[00:02:59.66]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Do you draw?

[00:03:00.80]

JANET FISH: Then I draw on the thing. And now, I use—I discovered this kind of architect's drafting pencil, which is water-soluble pencil. And I'll do the drawing on it. When I was doing the glasses, I would draw a fairly exact drawing, the ovals and then the edges of the glass and maybe a few gestures to the painting to indicate movements that I'd seen that I wanted to maintain, because everything was always changing, the light.

[00:03:31.82]

And I mean, something that's—at one point, when the sun is shining on it, it's pitch black, and it's full of shapes at another moment. So you have to really have a notion of how the composition is going and maintain it. But that would be a kind of grid for the painting, those outlines. Now that I'm not painting the glasses, I'm painting a lot of other things, the things I sketch in would be something man-made, like a dish that has to sit straight on a canvas.

[00:04:08.22]

And so I work that out, use a proportional scale and a ruler—before and now—work that out, work out the proportional relationships between things, kind of treating a ruler the way some people might take a square with gridded lines on it, or something, and hold it up. And I work something out with that. A lot of organic shapes, I don't really—I might figure out how much space of the canvas that something's going to take up, and mark it out. It just depends on the setup and what things I think I need to draw.

[00:04:48.81]

And sometimes, it's really a matter of allaying my own anxiety as I started painting. I don't really need these drawings all the time. And this ruler and proportional scale gives the wrong dimensions sometimes. So it's really a starting off point. Because once I start painting, I redraw the object again, and redraw the spaces. And that's partly that the color changes the apparent size of objects.

[00:05:17.48]

And so I redraw it, and I usually draw it wrong with a ruler. So I don't stick to that drawing at

all, but it gives me a start. It also is a way of thinking about what I'm about to do, like, thinking about how much space something's going to take up, making sure that if there's a close relationship to the edge of the canvas, that that's maintained and not lost, making sure that certain kinds of movements in the spaces will still be there if it's going to be an important part of the painting.

[00:05:50.87]

BARBARA SHIKLER: There was some discussion about—there was some discussion about your not drawing initially, that you actually would manipulate the objects until you—

[00:06:03.32]

JANET FISH: Oh, well, I don't do a drawing for the painting. I draw on the canvas. The drawing—like, some people do sketches before a painting. I don't do that. I've considered the still life, that drawing. So what I do is, like, move objects around for a couple of days sometimes. And I mean, I have things set up downstairs that I've set up four or five times and given up on or walked away from, because they weren't right. And I'll go back to—and maybe—usually, it ends up just discarded. I discard a lot of setups. And I spend a lot of time pushing things around and thinking about the relationships, because the objects have color. They've got the shape. I can really work out a lot of ideas there with those things.

[00:06:49.25]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Do you have several going at one time?

[00:06:51.17]

JANET FISH: I used to do a morning and an afternoon painting and a rainy-day painting, but I don't do that anymore. Now, I basically seem to work at one painting at a time. Sometimes I'll have a rainy-day painting and a sunny painting or something, but not always, because now I can work on the paintings longer. It's partly because since I'm using, often, in many paintings, areas of darkness with the light. There's always something I can work on. On bad days, I might be working on the drawing or blocking areas in, because sometimes the light is so momentary, and something that I want to put in is so momentary that it's good to have everything kind of blocked in around it so that I can run through it again with the light.

[00:07:42.54]

BARBARA SHIKLER: You never make use of a camera?

[00:07:45.30]

JANET FISH: I've been using—once I started to use the figures and animals, I started taking—I tried, for a while, taking snapshots of—when there was something really terrific happening in the light and I wanted to remember it, I tried taking a Polaroid of it. But those Polaroids always have flashes. And anyway, I never could get anything adequate. Every time I looked at a picture, it was totally useless. And I haven't been able to use the camera for the still life, but I used it for having people come and pose, and taking a lot of pictures.

[00:08:16.97]

BARBARA SHIKLER: "Sarah Swimming" looks as though you must have had to make use of one.

[00:08:20.27]

JANET FISH: With Sarah? What I did—I had a really—you wouldn't believe what I had. She's way off in the distance in a snapshot I took, this little girl, swimming. And she looked so happy in the water. And I didn't even know who the kid was. And I said, oh, I really would love to put her in the water. I wanted to do a water painting. And I kept thinking about it, so I asked around, and I found out who she was. She lived nearby. And then I got some friends of mine, Lorna's husband, the woman who poses, to go over and tell—make contact with the family and tell them that I was okay, and that I wanted to paint the little kid.

[00:09:04.98]

And so I used the snapshot in the way I've been using the snapshots, which is that I would sketch everything in and plan the painting out. Sometimes I'd take the snapshots and I cut them out, many different snapshots, and put them together with Scotch tape and tape them together. And I'd take arms from one snapshot and legs from another, and I use it as a way of thinking a painting out. And so in that case, what I did was, I drew her in with the snapshot and sort of looked at the way the water looked. It was a little tricky from the snapshot. And then Sarah came over and posed with her older sister. And she wouldn't look at me, because she knew I wanted to paint her. And she was a very pretty little rascal.

[00:10:00.15]

And finally, I got the cat. It was a kitten. And the cat was—we had the idea of bringing the cat out, and the kitten played around where I was sitting. So she was looking at the kitten and forgot to look at me. And then I was able to paint her and get as much in as I could with her there. I borrowed her water wings and stuck them in the water to work out how they looked in the water. And Lorna, who was wonderful, stuck her legs in the water so I could see. But certainly, we couldn't ask Sarah to do that. [Laughs.]

[00:10:38.37]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Yeah, yeah. You mean what they looked like under water?

[00:10:40.53]

JANET FISH: Yeah, to get the kind of way flesh would look through water, and things like that. And Lorna, for that painting, simply sat there with her feet in the water, which seemed to make her run to the bathroom a lot because she got so cold. [Laughs.]

[00:10:55.59]

BARBARA SHIKLER: The risks of posing.

[00:10:56.67]

JANET FISH: Yeah.

[00:10:56.97]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Do you remember that wonderful story by Joyce Cary, "The Horse's Mouth?"

[00:11:01.77]

JANET FISH: Oh, I loved it. Yes.

[00:11:04.04]

BARBARA SHIKLER: The poor frozen model. [They laugh.] Oh, that's wonderful. So as a rule now, since the introduction of the figure, your whole approach to the camera itself has changed.

[00:11:18.67]

JANET FISH: It's changed. Now, the place where I use the camera the most would be this autumn painting with all the figures in it. But what had happened was, all the little—it's a great, long painting, and it has dogs in it.

[00:11:31.74]

BARBARA SHIKLER: You're talking about Charles and Lorna.

[00:11:33.17]

JANET FISH: Charles and Lorna.

[00:11:35.39]

BARBARA SHIKLER: What's the—Drummer? Charles, Drummer, Lorna, et cetera, et cetera, et

cetera. Yes.

[00:11:40.59]

JANET FISH: And what they did was—those children came over, and we got a lot of cookies and soda out there with Lorna. And I said no—you know—and I took a lot of pictures of them, and I kept saying, you know, "Drink your soda. Eat your cookies." You know. I asked the little kid to climb up on the table, and not climb up on the table. And I took a lot of pictures of them. Some of them when they were thinking. I was trying to keep a kind of distance from the table I wanted. Then I decided to put Charles—and I took pictures of him separately. I wanted Drummer in the painting.

[00:12:18.57]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Let's just clarify. Charles is Charles Parness, and Drummer is a dog.

[00:12:22.23]

JANET FISH: Yeah. Drummer is a dog. And Drummer is a very good dog. He's been trained not to get up on the table, so it was very hard. We get him up on the table and try and make him sit. Then he's very unhappy, so he'd lie down. So Charles would hold a cookie up, and he wouldn't look in the right direction. I kept trying to get pictures of him. Finally, I got sort of a picture of him. And then I pasted all these things together, but the proportions were all wrong, because the camera was from different angles and things. So with everybody around and things, I kind of worked out their relative proportions to each other, how big the children were to Charles and Drummer and Lorna. I worked it out from head sizes and things like that.

[00:13:05.36]

BARBARA SHIKLER: It gets terribly mathematical, doesn't it?

[00:13:07.38]

JANET FISH: Well, I'm not good at math, so we won't get too excited about how mathematical it was.

[00:13:11.69]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Yes. I read that once, you translated your 1/32nd-of-an-inch to 3/4-of-an-inch.

[00:13:17.62]

JANET FISH: [Laughs.]

[00:13:18.64]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Very impressive, I must say. What sort of camera do you use, Janet?

[00:13:22.81]

JANET FISH: Well, I was using Polaroids. I just got a new camera, Instamatic-type things where you just point and shoot. And the light and the color is all wrong. Everybody still has to pose. This is the result of all of this. Basically what it does is take the stress off when I'm planning the painting and sketching things in, because I have a very hard time truly concentrating with other people there. So I work all of that out, and then people still have to pose.

[00:13:56.33]

And I paint everything around the figure. But since I can't really ask, especially children, to pose very long, I try and get everything painted around. I borrow everyone's clothes to paint the clothes. I use the color, and I stick the clothes in the light and get the right light on the thing. And generally, if someone will pose for me a lot, like Lorna was willing, I don't need the camera so much, because I can really—it works better to work without the camera, because it's just stultifying to use the camera, and the information is just very minimal.

[00:14:40.34]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Well, it's essentially a placement device.

[00:14:43.07]

JANET FISH: It's a placement device. It's sort of a sketching tool, and things, but it's not good for most of the things I want to paint, but you know, it's convenient. Like, I took a picture of the cat jumping off the table, and it wasn't a very good picture, but I had a general idea of the pose. And then I could pick her up and hold her and look at her on an angle. So I'd pick her up and hold her upside down, and then she'd bite me, and go on me. [Laughs.]

[00:15:09.86]

BARBARA SHIKLER: And how did you spill the cream?

[00:15:12.20]

JANET FISH: Well, I just—she is up there, in the middle of things. And then I thought it would be—I didn't really like the shape of the jug, so I tipped the jug over, and I wanted cream there. So I spilled it myself, I confess. [They laugh.]

[00:15:30.65]

BARBARA SHIKLER: And, well, that's a momentary thing. How do you maintain your—

[00:15:36.71]

JANET FISH: Well, it's a—

[00:15:37.31]

BARBARA SHIKLER: You'll model it.

[00:15:38.75]

JANET FISH: —filthy, messy thing to do. But when the cream was just there, I worked out the shape. And then it's somewhat trans—the tricky thing was the kind of transparency of the cream, getting that. It was analyzing it. With fugitive things that changed, sometimes—I've spilled it several times, so it's not—[They laugh.]

[00:15:58.88]

BARBARA SHIKLER: So not really a waste, is it?

[00:16:01.49]

JANET FISH: No.

[00:16:02.09]

BARBARA SHIKLER: And that was done in '86, and it's called "Scat!" And that's such an interesting project that I hope you'll talk about, which you did with Sondra Freckelton, Nancy Hagin, and Harriet Shorr.

[00:16:13.44]

JANET FISH: Harriet Shorr. Each of us picked an object. Mine were the candlesticks, and Nancy Hargan's was the drug. Sondra Freckelton was this fish, and Harriet was the blue plate. And we put them all in the box, and the box went around. And we weren't, any of us, allowed to look at the other's paintings. Mine was the last. I got the box last. Harriet's my good friend. She was itching to come over and see the painting while I'm working on it. She kept wanting to see it, because she'd already finished hers. And I decided that anything she said to me would be influenced by the fact that she had just painted the thing, so I refused to let her see my painting until it was done. Because otherwise, she might just say something to me. [Laughs.]

[00:16:54.26]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Yes. And you'd have to rebel.

[00:16:55.88]

JANET FISH: Yes. [They laugh.] So it was fun. And really, we thought—because there are all those things—and we really work quite differently, that with all of these things, where people think that if you're looking at something, that it is all going to be the same. We just thought it would be fun to show what does happen.

[00:17:15.10]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Indeed. And it was a very interesting thing. Were they shown at—

[00:17:18.97]

JANET FISH: Yeah. We were going to have it be our little private joke, because each of us was going to have a show that way. And we were just going to put the paintings in our show and never tell. But then somehow, Peter Tatischeff got wind of the idea and thought he would show all four paintings together. And even then, it was very funny. It took several people—it went all the way around the room before they realized that they'd seen that fish vase in several of the paintings.

[00:17:45.52]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Yes. That's the key object.

[00:17:47.53]

JANET FISH: Because it's such an eccentric object.

[00:17:49.48]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Who was the person who was showing it to Tatischeff?

[00:17:53.59]

JANET FISH: Harriet.

[00:17:54.25]

BARBARA SHIKLER: It was Harriet?

[00:17:54.70]

JANET FISH: It was her gallery.

[00:17:55.57]

BARBARA SHIKLER: That's right. Yeah.

[00:17:56.33]

JANET FISH: Yeah.

[00:17:56.71]

BARBARA SHIKLER: We'll get back into that. Whoops.

[00:17:59.02]

JANET FISH: Who—

[00:18:00.46]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Something fell.

[Recorder stops; restarts.]

Back again to mediums and that sort of thing. Oh, we got into drawing, but we haven't

determined your medium—

[00:18:11.86]

JANET FISH: Okay. From then, the drawing—what I do is wash the drawing out, practically, totally, just so that there's a vague hint there to avoid having the lines come through the painting or discolor the paint. And what I use is a mixture of four parts turpentine to one part oil. It seems to work the best on the kind of—with the kind of ground. I used to use one to five, and I thought it was too thin. And then some colors need more oil than others. And when I'm using those colors, I attempt to remember that. And also, sometimes, if the paint is getting thick somewhere, I try and go back in. So usually, as long as I'm working on the kind of acrylic ground, I have a sense, and I don't have much trouble with cracking or anything.

[00:19:09.23]

I used a prepared, commercial, very good quality rabbit skin glue-prepared canvas from one of the stores. I got a really good canvas. And not only did that—not only did I find it to be very brittle, the ground, it cracked all along the edges when it stretched, but it sucked the oil out of the colors so much. It was unbelievable. And I got the dark colors crackled in four paintings. Luckily, little paintings.

[00:19:44.36]

BARBARA SHIKLER: That's not very—

[00:19:44.63]

JANET FISH: And it was awful, because they were very complicated paintings, and I had to go back over and try and repaint little spots and things with—

[00:19:54.35]

BARBARA SHIKLER: With no guarantee that that would—

[00:19:56.48]

JANET FISH: Yeah, with extra oil in it and stuff. But that was another thing that turned me off rabbit skin primed.

[00:20:07.40]

BARBARA SHIKLER: A lot of the paintings of the Abstract Expressionists, apparently, have run into problems that deterioration and cracking.

[00:20:16.70]

JANET FISH: Oh, really?

[00:20:17.14]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Yeah, I guess.

[00:20:18.32]

JANET FISH: And what were they painting with, I wonder?

[00:20:20.37]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Well, it varied after a while.

[00:20:22.19]

JANET FISH: Really?

[00:20:22.31]

BARBARA SHIKLER: But they were largely acrylics, I think.

[00:20:24.20]

JANET FISH: Really?

[00:20:24.86]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Yeah.

[00:20:25.19]

JANET FISH: [Laughs.]

[00:20:25.79]

BARBARA SHIKLER: I'm not sure. I mean, I can't speak for all of them.

[00:20:28.41]

JANET FISH: I know that the Liquitex medium now tells you to put the—Liquitex now tells you to put medium in when you add water. They didn't used to, like, 20 years ago. You used it with—you thinned it with water. And now, you thin with water mixed with medium. And it must have come out of some of that cracking stuff.

[00:20:48.46]

BARBARA SHIKLER: I would assume. I would assume.

[00:20:50.15]

JANET FISH: Yeah.

[00:20:51.44]

BARBARA SHIKLER: The kind of paints you use, Block and Old Holland? Is that it?

[00:20:54.83]

JANET FISH: Old Holland. Yeah. Sometimes LeFranc. Lefebvre-Foinet. I've gotten some of their paint. But now the franc to the dollar it—makes paint incredibly expensive.

[00:21:09.15]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Incredibly. Incredibly. How about pastels? We haven't talked about that at all.

[00:21:13.30]

JANET FISH: Pastel is—all kinds. Sennelier, particularly, Rowney, sometimes. I go for the ones that have the—it's hard to find the good darks, and sometimes the sticks are too hard. They have too much medium in them. And so I stand there, testing sticks and trying to get ones that will draw.

[00:21:40.18]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Is there a correlation between those pastels which are hard and don't have enough oil, you say, or medium—

[00:21:50.32]

JANET FISH: No.

[00:21:50.62]

BARBARA SHIKLER: —those paints which—you described it earlier, that are—

[00:21:55.96]

JANET FISH: Yes. They're the darks. [Cross talk.] The same darks. It's the indigos and the alizarin black. Those colors are awkward. And the reason—



[00:22:10.77]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Alizarin is a color you can't really get rid of once it's in there, isn't it?

[00:22:14.21]

JANET FISH: I never put alizarin underneath things. And where I'm planning to have alizarin, if I'm not sure that the mark belongs there, I'll paint it with red and brown first, or a color like that and use it less. And this is because I did a painting, "A Package of Apples," and there was a drip, a red alizarin drip, and it came through. And I sanded it down there and repainted the box, the grain box, so that you couldn't see it anymore. And I thought I'd handled the problem. I saw the painting about six years later, and there was that drip.

[00:22:51.73]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Macbeth.

[00:22:52.31]

JANET FISH: Yes. [They laugh.] Come through.

[00:22:55.14]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Damn spot.

[00:22:55.60]

JANET FISH: [Laughs.] So I never use alizarin. And I mean, I try very hard to watch out for those colors. There are colors that I'm not convinced that they are permanent, but they're so seductive. And there's no way to have them except to use them. So I try and get the best brand I can, and hope for the best. It's very difficult with paints, because you get a favorite paint company, and then a coffee company buys it and changes the formulas. And you suddenly have junk.

[00:23:31.65]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Without warning.

[00:23:33.21]

JANET FISH: Without warning. And suddenly, everybody will be calling you up and saying, "My whites are turning yellow." And then there's lots of oil coming out of the tube. And you go there, and you find out that they've changed their formula. They haven't told you. They're hoping to just sell something cheaper for the same price, I suppose.

[00:23:54.15]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Are you naming names? [They laugh.]

[00:23:57.27]

JANET FISH: Well, it was the Blocks I'm not buying any more. And I was very worried about Oud Holland, O-U-D.

[00:24:07.47]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Yes.

[00:24:07.98]

JANET FISH: But I have been still using them. They seem to be holding up. I mean, you run out of paints to use sometimes. I was interested in a new paint that my brother-in-law had said was good, Gamblin. But then I bought some, and then I started reading the ingredients and found out that they really weren't using much good color. So at least they have the ingredients listed so you know what you're painting with, if you can look it up. But the paints that won't even tell you what they're mixed with, I try to avoid.

[00:24:41.13]

BARBARA SHIKLER: You look it up in *The Artist's Handbook*, the Mayer?

[00:24:43.95]

JANET FISH: Yeah, but you can't trust Mayer, I mean, unless it's this year's edition, because they change their formulas.

[00:24:49.56]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Exactly.

[00:24:51.15]

JANET FISH: So it's just—you do what you can do.

[00:24:57.09]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Everyone's asked you about your size and the mark and the relationship between size and mark.

[00:25:03.12]

JANET FISH: Right.

[00:25:03.54]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Do you want to talk about that a little?

[00:25:05.43]

JANET FISH: The scale?

[00:25:06.06]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Yeah, the scale.

[00:25:09.78]

JANET FISH: The scale is really filled out. I think the scale was larger when I was doing the glass. And I've reduced the scale now, as I'm using other things. It has something to do—it has to do with a number of things, initially with the paint mark and the expense of color, as I think I said earlier. Then, also, with the gesture, the paint being important. I don't want to be sitting, hunched over, painting with my wrist, and peering at something next to my nose. I'm very nearsighted, and I couldn't see paintings that were too small. I love Altoon Sultan's paintings, but I have to take my glasses off to look at them.

[00:25:53.73]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Yes.

[00:25:54.48]

JANET FISH: And so I'm painting for my—because I'm painting for myself, I'm painting at a size that I'm comfortable with and can see. Some of the scale, I think, in a way, has to do with body size and with a sense of size and a human—what's a human size to me. They seldom go much larger than I am, though I've been doing some long paintings now that are bigger. But I don't expect it—I don't like to go too far over my head, in a sense, in height, and so that scale has some relevance to that.

[00:26:36.88]

BARBARA SHIKLER: There are three things which seem to be intertwined having to do with your vision, and your glasses, and the possibility of distortion, and the way you'll deal with that, which leads to questions about accident—accident meaning, perhaps, a happy accident, where something will dictate an unanticipated change. How does all of that work together?

[00:27:00.36]

JANET FISH: Well, accident—I'm not sure about—I don't like "accident." I think the paintings should be an intention. There are things that you—"accident," in that you see something that you didn't expect to see. That's something that's part of the painting from the beginning to the end. I never know what the painting's going to look like.

[00:27:23.64]

Like, even setting the thing up, I'm going on a good feeling, in a sense that this is the framework. The subject matter and the set of the painting is like the grid in which something can happen. It's the place where something can happen. I set up a place where a drama will occur, and I will find out what that is. So it's the best possible environment for something to happen. I don't know what that will be until the painting is done. And then if the painting is an expression of the process of making that thing and the process of the experience of experiencing that situation through a period of time experiencing, looking, and everything else through that point of time, then I am doing it.

[00:28:11.29]

BARBARA SHIKLER: That's a kind of a drama that goes on, as it were.

[00:28:14.33]

JANET FISH: Yeah. That's why I say I don't consider still lifes to be still. That's why the light is always in it. The light is there to keep things moving, as if there was a model walking around. If it was a figure, the light is always there. And this is important. That movement of the light is an important part of my attitude towards things. But I drifted from the question.

[00:28:39.16]

BARBARA SHIKLER: That's okay. It's nice to hear it. Well, I guess part of the question really had to do with your vision and your glasses and distortion. I keep thinking of El Greco's happy distortions, as far as we are concerned. [Laughs.]

[00:28:52.09]

JANET FISH: But then as we know, Mannerism was the style.

[00:28:56.02]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Yes, exactly.

[00:28:56.84]

JANET FISH: And all these doctors who think he couldn't see, I think they don't know their art history. The glasses make a distortion. I'm painting close-up. The line drawings and some of that measuring I do makes it possible when I'm working close-up, to not lose the scale. It's all very apparent to me if I step away, if I've drawn something tilted or too big. It's simply that I basically work at arm's length. I'm about at arm's length—arm and brush length from what I'm looking at, and the same length from what I'm painting. And that permits me to see quite a lot on the canvas. But standing away is a time when I can see if I'm making some mistake, like tilting or moving, something that could happen with a curvature of the glasses.

[00:29:52.67]

BARBARA SHIKLER: You stand, clearly. You must stand. You walk. You get a good deal of exercise in.

[00:29:56.54]

JANET FISH: Yeah. And I sit. I sit, too, while I paint. [Laughs.]

[00:29:59.51]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Yeah. What kind of a work day do you have, and a hour work week, for that matter?

[00:30:03.96]

JANET FISH: Well, I basically get up in the morning, early, and I like to start work around seven or eight, depending on the light, and the painting I'm working on, and work. And I have very long workdays in the summer. And then sometimes, if I'm feeling really nutty, I'll just work through with just maybe an hour off a lunch. Or if I'm a little more sane, I might take a couple of hours off in the middle of the day, or some someplace in the day, but work until around when the shadows come from the hills around six, but it just depends. I like to work at least an eight-hour day, and I don't always achieve that. And sometimes I work more.

[00:30:44.06]

BARBARA SHIKLER: And all week?

[00:30:45.14]

JANET FISH: And I work all week. And then, because there are interruptions or things happen, I work weekends, too. A work week isn't really relevant. So I work a lot.

[00:30:59.17]

BARBARA SHIKLER: You do, indeed.

[00:30:59.95]

JANET FISH: Yeah.

[00:31:00.22]

BARBARA SHIKLER: You do, indeed. Actually, your sanity is in the painting.

[00:31:05.14]

JANET FISH: Yes. [Laughs.]

[00:31:05.74]

BARBARA SHIKLER: You say when you're insane, when you're—

[00:31:07.42]

JANET FISH: Yeah. Well, I think, you know, with all of the—one reason—there's some question, I think, sometimes, like, why some people paint and are not thrown by all the horrible things that happen to you as you're trying to do something, and I think that since my sanity is so tied up in my painting and my painting was initially such a wonderful escape from me—from my life, and then, later on, was just a way of straightening myself out and finding myself and also, gave me a confidence—my painting gave me confidence. And that is something I could never give up, or adulterate for someone else, because it's too important to me.

[00:31:49.70]

BARBARA SHIKLER: It's interesting that you so often use the word "energy" to describe what's happening in a painting. And the word "energy" applies to the energies that either turn inward or turn outward. And in your case, energy has been the freeing and the creative factor.

[00:32:08.92]

JANET FISH: Yeah.

[00:32:11.05]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Emotionally, and as a painter.

[00:32:13.99]

JANET FISH: And I mean, "energy" is a very broad word. I mean, there's just there's so many things implied by it, but it is sort of a life situation, things moving and being.

[00:32:26.80]

BARBARA SHIKLER: You speak of the energy as almost metaphysical—

[00:32:34.30]

JANET FISH: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:32:34.63]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Or people have told you do.

[00:32:36.03]

JANET FISH: Yeah. [Laughs.]

[00:32:36.82]

BARBARA SHIKLER: And it's so difficult to differentiate sometimes as a kind of religious thing. But essentially, what people seem to take from your work is a very affirmative stand on life.

[00:32:51.31]

JANET FISH: Well, that's what it is. It's not—If I was a person who had gone through war and the things that people go through, I would be painting a different kind of painting. I haven't, and I'm painting as honestly as I can about things. And there are reasons for living, and I think I am painting about that kind of side of things. I don't have much desire to go into the black side. I mean, in a way, since painting pulled me out of it, I don't particularly want to wallow in something that was hellish for me. I'm not going to stay there.

[00:33:33.46]

BARBARA SHIKLER: That's why it seemed so appropriate to read that Pearlstein, at one point, called you a Social Realist.

[00:33:39.33]

JANET FISH: Oh, yeah. [Laughs.] I thought that was funny. I mean, it took me totally by surprise when he did that. [Laughs.]

[00:33:44.73]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Yeah. Well, that's another way of seeing, isn't it?

[00:33:47.76]

JANET FISH: Yeah. [Laughs.]

[00:33:49.41]

BARBARA SHIKLER: You never talked about the Figurative Alliance here. I don't know why that's brought up. I guess because of people like Pearlstein or Paul Georges.

[00:33:56.62]

JANET FISH: Well, when I was first living down on Jefferson Street and knew so few people and didn't really know many artists, and did not know any realists or representational artists at all, I heard about the Figurative Art Alliance. And I used to go and sit quietly in the back and listen to these people scream at each other. [Laughs.] And some of it was quite terrific. I remember this painter, John "Coach".

[00:34:25.90]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Koch. ["Coke."] Koch.

[00:34:26.80]

JANET FISH: Koch. Koch. He came and talked about his work. And I had been in his studio when I was in college. And at the time, I had been so impressed by the studio that had Rembrandts on the wall. And he painted on a priceless Persian carpet and never spilled a drop.

[00:34:43.08]

BARBARA SHIKLER: I've been there. I've spent lots of time there.

[00:34:45.28]

JANET FISH: Oh.

[00:34:45.70]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Yeah.

[00:34:45.77]

JANET FISH: I couldn't believe it. So I enjoyed hearing him. And there were other people. Gradually, that place degenerated and became really monstrous, and I stopped going. A lot of guys took over who were desperately trying to act the way they thought Abstract Expressionists had acted.

[00:35:05.35]

BARBARA SHIKLER: You're talking about the Figurative Alliance?

[00:35:06.76]

JANET FISH: Yes.

[00:35:07.03]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Yeah.

[00:35:07.30]

JANET FISH: Yeah. And also, the reason for it—so for me, it was one kind of contact with art conversation I was having at the time, and I enjoyed it. And then, later on, when I knew more other artists and things, I didn't need it.

[00:35:25.45]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Well, it was a period, I think, that was so fraught with tension. The whole polarity between the movements of abstraction and realism were, at that time, like two enemy camps.

[00:35:38.59]

JANET FISH: Well, they seemed to be two enemy camps. And it always seemed too bad, because I think that a lot of the artists that I really have respect for were never particularly concerned with whether something was realist or abstract, that this is not an a worthy issue. But I mean, one makes choices to do something. And I feel that my choice to be painting with images does not mean that I think someone else should not be doing what they're doing. I want them to do what they're doing, because I get something from seeing their work. But I don't—I mean, I would hate it if everyone was painting like me. And I don't have much respect for people who are so dogmatic as to want everyone to be like them.

[00:36:27.35]

BARBARA SHIKLER: You admired the work of Victoria Barr. You liked what she did, I read. And it seemed appropriate to ask you whether you are drawn to those painters who you admire, whether you share any of those qualities that they have. But clearly, that's not always the case.

[00:36:47.18]

JANET FISH: It's not. I mean, over the years, I've admired different painters at different times. And a lot of times, someone says, "Well, whose work do you like?" It'll just depend on what shows I've seen recently. So that I mean, you know, it's so funny to be—In some ways, I feel—like one place here, I said, "I like this." Another place, there, I say, "I like that." And then I'm stuck with these few things, when actually, I've been looking at lots of things all along.

[00:37:16.32]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Sure. Well, you mentioned Altoon Sultan.

[00:37:18.97]

JANET FISH: Yeah.

[00:37:19.18]

BARBARA SHIKLER: The show she's got up there—is it at Marlborough?

[00:37:21.73]

JANET FISH: At Marlborough, yeah. And Rafael Ferrer is a painter—I have one of his paintings there, and I like his work tremendously. And I like—but there's a lot of work I like. Some of it I can't afford, and some of it, I can have.

[00:37:39.13]

BARBARA SHIKLER: You ever make trades?

[00:37:40.27]

JANET FISH: I trade all the time, yeah. And then Charles trades and gives me presents. He's always running out and trying to trade with someone. [Laughs.]

[00:37:51.22]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Charles sounds like a happy choice in your life. You are quoted in Gerrit Henry's book as saying you went out with so many bastards for so long, he was the first decent fellow.

[00:38:02.28]

JANET FISH: [Laughs.] Yes. And sometimes I want to kick him down the stairs for being a nice guy, but no. [Laughs.]

[00:38:07.95]

BARBARA SHIKLER: It may work in reverse as well. [Laughs.]

[00:38:10.33]

JANET FISH: No, no. He is a nice person. [Laughs.]

[00:38:13.77]

BARBARA SHIKLER: That's a very lucky find, isn't it?

[00:38:16.29]

JANET FISH: Yeah.

[00:38:16.41]

BARBARA SHIKLER: And you work together, do you? You work in the same location, in fact.

[00:38:19.97]

JANET FISH: Yeah. I don't like—I mean, he has a studio away from here, on Greene Street,

and I'm happy he's there, like tonight. And the studio in Vermont is taking a very long time to be built, but it's my intention to put a big lock on the door between our two sides, because they have separate entrances. Because I really like to be alone when I'm working.

[00:38:48.66]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Vermont. That sounds like such a happy thing in your life. Whereabouts in Vermont?

[00:38:53.78]

JANET FISH: I'm in Middletown Springs, or near Middle—and now, my house is actually in Wells.

[00:38:58.81]

BARBARA SHIKLER: What's that near?

[00:38:59.50]

JANET FISH: It's between Dorset and Rutland or Manchester. Those would be the biggest towns around there, but it's not in one of those towns.

[00:39:10.96]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Does your work—can you—for instance, if you were to look at your work, would you know which things you painted there, other than the subject matter? I don't mean that—

[00:39:21.07]

JANET FISH: Oh, yeah, because of the difference in the color of the light. New York is very beige and gray and muted colors. And in Vermont, everything gets kind of intensely blue and green and brown. I think it's the quality of the light, with all that reflected color coming in, and the sun having less dirt to mute it. I mean, New York has some very beautiful colors in it, but they are very different things.

[00:39:47.74]

BARBARA SHIKLER: And yet when one thinks about your work, I never think of colors as muted.

[00:39:54.17]

JANET FISH: Yeah. [Laughs.] Well, I have more beige in my New York painting.

[00:39:58.09]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Your windowsill setups are not muted, even your honey jars. Were they done there?

[00:40:05.98]

JANET FISH: They were done in New York. No, I haven't—I didn't move to Vermont 'til about ten years ago, I guess. I got a house in Middletown Springs. And since then, I've changed houses, but—

[00:40:19.99]

BARBARA SHIKLER: It seems to me you still have Bermuda in your head or in your hand. I'm not sure.

[00:40:25.06]

JANET FISH: Probably. Because one of the things I notice is when I go South, everyone accepts my colors as reality, and never questions the color. And here in New York, people think that the colors are high key and exaggerated, but this never comes up as a comment in the South, or even out Southwest, in any of those places. It seems like these are colors



that people live with there and understand. So I think that having that attitude towards color did come from just my childhood, and from what I saw.

[Recorder stops; restarts.]

[00:41:19.77]

BARBARA SHIKLER: We're talking about color, and the way your Bermuda influence has remained in your consciousness or your unconsciousness.

[00:41:30.84]

JANET FISH: Right. [Laughs.] Just maybe attitude. Yeah.

[00:41:35.65]

BARBARA SHIKLER: You have a whole range of things that seem to have changed from the recording of a light, as it were, around a few objects and the way it developed. It seems to me that there were several pivotal works, which, rather than suggest to you what they were, I wonder if you could point them out. For instance, we touched very briefly on the way painted glasses were a kind of a culmination of complexities of shapes. And then what happened, how they changed, how your focus changed, and why? Have you become tired of —

[00:42:22.51]

JANET FISH: I think what would happen is, I'd be painting something and basically work through it, and become restless so that when I was doing the packages, I had begun to—I had come to the package for particular reasons, and I was becoming restless. And I defined to myself the interest was in the play of light on the plastic and then the volumes underneath. So I found a couple of jars of pickled peppers, and I painted them. And they were kind of floating. So underneath, I could see the light coming through, and that was the most exciting thing, all of a sudden, for me to paint, not the pickles in the jar and the glass, but the light coming through.

[00:43:08.60]

So then I painted honey jars and those bottles of olive oil, and things, because of leading on from that, I became more and more involved in the light and really—But also there, I mean, these things are progressive, slowly. Like, I didn't like people reading the labels. And I found that whenever there was a word in the painting, people focused on it and obsessed on it, so I started in on just plain water glasses and became more and more clear that I was focusing on the light and all that kind of movement. And I kept defining my interest and expanding and defining my interest in light and what that meant in a painting.

[00:43:51.45]

But then I came to a painting—The F.W.F painting was absolutely—everything went so well in that picture. The paint went on so smoothly. I didn't make mistakes. I didn't have to change things. The shapes worked the way I wanted to, and the movement through—that was carried through the glasses in the movement, and in that shallow space, and the color relationships. Everything worked the way that I had been wanting things. I mean, just everything went too easily. Very easily. And then I just couldn't paint that way anymore.

[00:44:30.22]

BARBARA SHIKLER: That was 1976.

[00:44:31.51]

JANET FISH: Yeah, so I decided to have—I started to look around for different things. So I moved to this loft, and I could see out the window, so I started to paint things and let some of the buildings come into the paintings and flip them upside down. And I was just trying things out. I did one painting, and there's quite a lot of skyline. And my friends would come over, and they really didn't like the change. I got quite a lot of negative response to the paintings I was doing, and they were very upset with it. And some of them felt it was important to tell me that this wasn't great, what I was doing. But—

[00:45:06.07]

BARBARA SHIKLER: But why?

[00:45:06.79]

JANET FISH: Well, I guess because they were disappointed. They must have grown to like the other paintings, and they didn't like to see this happening. But anyway, I decided that I had to keep following through. Because even when you're making a change, your paintings aren't necessarily great, but you have to go through them in order to come to somewhere else. So the only way that I could change—I couldn't just say this is a good or a bad idea. I have always felt that you have to do the idea enough times, and then you'll show yourself that it's a good or a bad idea. But you can't say from a bad try, that's a bad idea.

[00:45:46.33]

So I kept doing them, and then that led to other things. I found different kinds of shapes of glasses, and I was doing that. Then I let the landscape come in more, like, flowers and things. And then I brought in a whole bunch—I did a painting—I can't remember what I called it. It was a decanter with some berries and a goldfish bowl and a lot of flowers. I went and picked all these flowers. I was working up in Maine. And I put them in. It was a kind of a diary painting, in a sense, having the flowers in there.

[00:46:28.61]

BARBARA SHIKLER: What do you mean?

[00:46:29.72]

JANET FISH: Oh, a diary of what was blooming around the studio at the time, because different things were coming and going. And I just kept picking them and putting them in, as I was painting the painting. But those brought in organic shapes and things. And so it was a way of moving away from kind of rigid shapes, the ovals, which I was getting really tired of the ovals of the glasses. I just didn't want to paint another oval.

[00:46:54.20]

And there were things I liked about what was going on in the glass that could only happen there. And then when I brought in these other colors and shapes, then it brought in an interest in texture, and the changes in texture. The light had to change, because the light was no longer going through things. It's going through and upon things. But I was very clearly defined as the light—not only the light being an interest, but I wanted a very high activity in the painting, not a quiet painting, not a simple, quiet painting. I wanted a very, very intensely active painting.

[END OF TRACK AAA\_fish88\_3831\_m]

[00:00:06.26]

BARBARA SHIKLER: This is January 31, 1988 with Janet Fish at her studio at 101 Prince Street. Second tape of the second interview, side one.

[00:00:18.80]

JANET FISH: Okay, we were talking about the paintings, the progression of reasons changing. I think what's happened with bringing all these flowers and fruit, things like that, is—I've gotten an interest in texture and other kinds of shape, a different kind of movement, possibilities in the canvas. And then, one thing has always led to another, and in changing the—something about—I've changed the subject for formal reasons, and then the change and the subject has brought new ideas to me, other kinds of ideas. I feel that there's so many motivations for making a painting, that when you talk only in formal things or only of content, or only of this or only of that, you're never paying attention to everything in the painting.

[00:01:12.48]

But then I put some goldfish in the painting, and things. And there's no reason not to put

figure in. So then Darlene came—we did a painting. First, I did a painting of Charles. And I just had him sit, painting him smoking. Wasn't too great. I don't think I ever showed it. And then in the summertime, I asked this kid, Darlene, to come and pose. And I was just going to use her head, maybe do it as part of a painting or something. I took her outside. And I was thinking of doing something outside. And she fell down on the blanket to lay down. [Telephone rings.] And she did a great pose.

[Recorder stops; restarts.]

Okay, so—and the pose was so great, I just did a whole figure. And then she posed for a couple other things. I did a pastel of her, and things. And then I did some more figure paintings, one of Barry Yourgrau, who's a writer. And I had him pose with his writing materials, well, with my writing materials. I decided not in his studio or anything, just my idea about his work probably.

[00:02:34.07]

So from doing these things—and no one was too thrilled about same figures, either. No one's ever been too thrilled about any change I've made in my work. And what's been interesting and curious about every change I've done is that then I end up with people who say, "I liked your earlier work best." And then there are people who say, "Now I like your work." So there have been people—there's always been a sort of vocal misery at a change, and then these other people, mysterious new people who like the new work. Many people don't like figure painting anyway. And then there are people who only like figure painting.

[00:03:13.36]

BARBARA SHIKLER: But, in fact, you really got a whole other element here with the figure.

[00:03:20.71]

JANET FISH: The figure brings different changes. The figure is easier, in a way, to compose with a figure, because it takes up so much space in the painting and takes up so much tension. And it's much harder to arrange five objects together and get them to relate proportionally and do anything, than it is to put one figure with its arm bent in that space. But on the other hand, there's complications of the gesture and the face, and the way the expression—just a fraction of an inch will totally change the expression on a face. And there has to be a decision about the content that this figure brings to the picture and what you want to say with that expression. And it's very tricky, because everyone will focus on a face.

[00:04:06.15]

BARBARA SHIKLER: I think it must be very tricky for you to keep the formal elements alive when you've got the dictatorship of the figure, and the face, too. As it were, it's a kind of a war.

[00:04:17.37]

JANET FISH: Yeah, well, it's been interesting to see what I would bring out of that. And I've had my failures with it, too. But what I've come to now from seeing this—I mean, what I look forward to be working on this summer—it's easier to get people to pose in the summer—is I think I want the still life with something in action, either an animal or a person, where there's a living creature in the painting. I want it to be in motion. At first I had them pose. And I decided I'm not interested in a posed figure. So it has to be a situation of—I did a painting of the cat and Kara in a painting with a bunch of goldenrod in between. And I had Kara half out of getting out of a chair, and the cat up to her usual tricks and pulling something apart—but that was really working with the motion of the figure.

[00:05:24.76]

And so if there's any sense of direction—and I'm never really totally sure where I'm going. I don't work that way. Oh, "Kara" is spelled with a "K." I will just find out. But that's what I expect to do, at least a few paintings where I have something. And I've also been using some Roman busts and things in the paintings as another way of using a figure and not using the figure. Anyways, just interesting to study these things.

[00:06:03.74]

BARBARA SHIKLER: So in addition to the mysterious nature of what the human creature will do in a painting, there is the formal aspect of it, where the bust—you have really no personality intruding. You have another object, in fact, in human form.

[00:06:25.43]

JANET FISH: Yeah, it is. It's a human. They're Roman busts, so they tend to have that kind of naturalism. They have an expression of different kinds. And that's a little tricky too, using that. And they have echoes and evocations. Every object that you put in a painting has its baggage, has some kind of meaning in it that's a little out of control. And I tend to put everything together according—and I freewheel a lot in a way with the choices. Now that I use all these different objects, there's a way of putting things together. Some of the choices are formal. And some choices are associative, things that are right together in my mind. I would say that I am not following—I don't like narrative painting. But it's not narrative in that sense. But it's associative, things that are correct together, things that might be right together for one reason or another.

[00:07:38.62]

BARBARA SHIKLER: How do you feel about what—you say everything in a painting has—all objects have their baggage. All things have their baggage. And the viewer has baggage, as it were. [They laugh.]

[00:07:50.76]

JANET FISH: I can't control it. It's so rare that someone looks at something and thinks of what I was thinking of. And I don't think that they should. And I don't believe that I think of what the artist is thinking of when I'm looking at their paintings. And the storyline is never what makes the painting for me, anyway. I think years ago Harriet Shorr wrote a review of a show, and she talked about one painting. And she talked about the Ice Queen's Palace. It was in a Hans Christian Andersen story. And I thought it was so incredible. I hadn't seen her in years since school. And then she tuned right in, because that had been going through my mind, the ice, because it was a story I'd loved as a child, the Ice Queen's Palace.

[00:08:37.26]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Me, too.

[00:08:38.04]

JANET FISH: And it was something that as I was painting those glasses of water, I was thinking of. But that's the only time I ever saw someone—

[00:08:46.83]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Do you have strong feelings about the feelings of the people who buy your work, where they go and where the paintings go to live, et cetera?

[00:08:55.02]

JANET FISH: No, I don't. I really don't. Sometimes it's very distressing to find out where the painting is. I had a pleasant experience recently when I was in New Orleans, and there were some guys who had collected two paintings. And they look terrific in their house. But, I mean, I've had some miserable experiences going into a house and seeing my painting in a horrible place. In their place, I was very surprised. I'd done a painting called "Thinking of Giverny." But in New Orleans, it looked like it should have been "Thinking of New Orleans." [Laughs] Yeah. It was so right for that city. And I was very surprised.

[00:09:33.69]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Was it one of the old houses with the courtyards?

[00:09:36.00]

JANET FISH: It was a beautiful old house in the old area with woodwork and everything. So it

was one of the few times I was—you know—yeah, I said, oh, that's incredible.

[00:09:49.38]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Yes, I should think that tropical setting would be a nice house for your work. Where there were other painters there whose work you liked, too? Does that matter to you?

[00:09:59.32]

JANET FISH: No, I mean, I think everybody's got a right to what they like. They had some Mapplethorpe photographs, which I thought were terrific, and some other interesting work. But really, I don't even want to mess into other people's taste, really. Or I'm sometimes concerned that my work hold up wherever it is, and would be sorry if it wasn't. But if somebody could have my painting and have a painting by somebody I don't like—and it's not none of my business.

[00:10:34.40]

BARBARA SHIKLER: And it doesn't upset you to see it? So often people go back and see their own work and come away with a sick feeling in the pit of their stomach and say, "How could I have done that? How could I have let it out of the studio?"

[00:10:49.49]

JANET FISH: Um, let me think. I've been lucky. I haven't seen a lot of my work in other places. And sometimes it's been rather nice. I've walked in and said, "Oh, this is a better painting than I thought it was." That happened also in New Orleans. The other painting that they have was a head of a child. And I'd had so much trouble with the painting when I did it that I was feeling very negative about the picture. It had been really a lot of struggle. And a lot of things had changed. And everything seemed to be so awkward as I was working on it. And then I saw it there, and it didn't seem awkward at all. And I said, well, this is a happy time. [Laughs.] I mean, it was a very pleasant experience. And I said, gee, I remember this being such an awkward painting. And then I have paintings—and if I can get my hands on them, I take them back to the studio and hide them. Sometimes I—

[00:11:53.67]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Have you ever done that?

[00:11:54.51]

JANET FISH: Well, I've gone up to the gallery and just looked at something and realized that it really wasn't a good painting. And so it mulls in the studio somewhere. If I'm lucky, I don't let it out. I try and catch these things before they leave.

[00:12:11.13]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Sometimes I suppose it's hard to detach oneself from the thing during the process of working on it, even close after.

[00:12:19.47]

JANET FISH: You can't always trust your attitude. I mean, as far as liking something, I like something while I'm making it. I hate the painting just towards the end when some of my dreams haven't come true. And I don't trust my attitudes about the painting. I don't trust my sense of whether it's a good or a bad painting, immediately, at all, as far as making an evaluation.

[00:12:46.35]

BARBARA SHIKLER: I wanted to get to a few just sporadic things here and there. You're always being labeled. It seems to me that in addition to the labels on your bottles that you wanted people to disregard—

[00:13:01.92]

JANET FISH: Right. [Laughs.]

[00:13:02.25]

BARBARA SHIKLER: —you've got labels on you that are forever being imposed, from Photorealism, to your Social Realist—words by Pearlstein. And then you called yourself a Perceptualist one day.

[00:13:17.21]

JANET FISH: Well, I sat around, you know—Someone said, "are you—" Sometimes people demand that you come up with it. They say, "Well, you need to know what kind of painter you are." And, well, I'm not a Photorealist. Even though recently using the snapshots—I'm still not a Photorealist. And I don't have those attitudes. And part of the problem is that I haven't been part of a movement. There are other realist painters, so-called, of different stripes and everything. And everybody's been pretty much following their own way because this hasn't been a fashionable thing to do. So there's not enough people on the bandwagon.

[00:13:54.66]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Do you feel that's still true, just to interject that?

[00:13:56.85]

JANET FISH: Yeah, I do. I think it's particularly true now because there is imagery. Imagery is now acceptable. It has to be expressionist imagery. And it's got to be in a sense, punkish, you know, angry. It's got to have, let's say, a sadistic edge, or a masochistic edge to it. So it's even more true, I think, because the kind of painting I do is even more out of fashion now because before people who are hungry for an image, would maybe look in that direction.

[00:14:38.60]

BARBARA SHIKLER: So it's the war of the theories that's going on behind the scenes all the time.

[00:14:44.99]

JANET FISH: Well, I've never been interested in—an art historian I think is often interested in artists' movements. And they like to find threads. And they like to find connections. And artists aren't always involved in movements, threads, those particular—they're not involved with themselves in society all the time. Some artists are more conscious of it or not. But maybe there also are artists that were most affected by art historians. What was it that was that wonderful phrase, "an artist needs an art historian like a bird needs an orin—"

[00:15:21.52]

BARBARA SHIKLER: That was Barney Newman.

[00:15:22.87]

JANET FISH: Barney Newman? It was a lovely—

[00:15:24.07]

BARBARA SHIKLER: He said, "art history is to painting what—

[00:15:27.97]

JANET FISH: "Ornithology is to birds."

[00:15:29.05]

BARBARA SHIKLER: —is to the birds." [They laugh.]

[00:15:31.12]

JANET FISH: I thought, what a wonderful thing.

[00:15:32.57]

BARBARA SHIKLER: It's great.

[00:15:33.40]

JANET FISH: And I think that's completely the—I thought, wow, what a great phrase.

[00:15:37.81]

BARBARA SHIKLER: It's a wonderful phrase. Although there is a group now of, I guess, it's Germans, Dutch, the Marxists, et cetera.

[00:15:47.11]

JANET FISH: Oh, I read this thing. And then I was laughing because I read that kind of a description of one of Rackstraw Downes's paintings. "This is the bridge the workers are going to." So I call him up. And I said, "Well, Rackstraw, and were you thinking of the workers when you were doing that painting?"

[00:16:06.47]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Probably made it with the Marxists, huh? [They laugh.] That too shall pass, I guess.

[00:16:12.34]

JANET FISH: I think it will.

[00:16:12.71]

BARBARA SHIKLER: You've also been called—in your most recent phase, you've been called a Romantic.

[00:16:18.46]

JANET FISH: Romantic? Yes, I mean, I—people will call you anything. Basically, my attitude about labels has been, it's nice to show a lot, so any label that will get me into a show, fine, if I can somehow—I'm not going to argue about this labeling. Let people put their shows together however they want, if they see me fitting. And I think a good enough painting might fit many labels. That's what one hopes, is that you could actually fit into quite a few little things.

[00:16:53.57]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Indeed, indeed. And if you live long enough, you get a whole collection going—

[00:16:58.70]

JANET FISH: That's right.

[00:16:59.63]

BARBARA SHIKLER: —of labels. Okay. Silence on the tape. Little questions about your objects, your iconography—Close himself was interviewed about something. He stresses that his stress is on the process.

[00:17:24.86]

JANET FISH: Uh-huh [affirmative].

[00:17:25.31]

BARBARA SHIKLER: And the iconography is not important. You keep us involved in your iconography. They stay alive for us.

[00:17:39.08]

JANET FISH: Yeah, well, really in the '60s, process was what was important. And something that's interesting is that I think at any particular time, as a particular train of thought is being stressed in the media, in a sense, or in the galleries, people discuss their work in reference to that. And then as the stress changes, you discuss your work and reference to other things. I was always very aware in discussing process—and I certainly have talked a lot about—I used to think more about process earlier on.

[00:18:14.28]

But process was never the—but you see part of the thing of going and not painting in a sense with the tide—I made that kind of decision. Deciding to not pay attention to all those voices, I also decided not to go with certain kinds of trains of thought. And I had a train of thought here. We were discussing process, or the way—

[00:18:51.29]

BARBARA SHIKLER: The '60s—

[00:18:52.11]

JANET FISH: '60s—

[00:18:52.38]

BARBARA SHIKLER: —where that was paramount.

[00:18:55.99]

JANET FISH: It was never a lack of awareness of what I could do. I've never made a decision—what I'm doing is not because I can't do something else. I've got the skill to do whatever I feel like, actually. I just made a choice to be very self-involved in a sense, to paint what I wanted, to follow—to do something—to paint all the time, like a long novel, paint paintings that were like novels. I like long novels. I like to be totally immersed in something.

[00:19:34.87]

And I made choices that sometimes I've—and then I've said to myself, "I can't be angry when I choose not to do what people want. And I can't be angry at them that they don't want it." And so process—I did think those ideas were there. And they were part of my work. Different thoughts like that were part of what I was doing at one point.

[00:19:59.95]

I've become, I guess, less and less interested in that side of it. I think that the construction of the painting is so important to what's conveyed by it that there is always something conveyed to the viewer that they don't understand why they're getting it, and that everything that you do in a painting is an illusion, including the illusion of immediacy and freshness. That's simply an illusion.

[00:20:30.89]

It's not something that happens by painting fast. It's simply an illusion that you decide to have. When somebody wants to do a painting and to show naiveté, and then they draw like a child, they're not naïve people. That's another illusion. Everything is an illusion in a painting, every single thing you get from it.

[00:20:56.12]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Yes, indeed. Just that point you made about freshness and a spontaneity—apparently in order to keep the thing appearing to be fresh, you will go over a line over and over and over again to make it look as though it was just done once.

[00:21:15.86]

JANET FISH: Yeah. Right. And you have to learn. And I spent time learning how to paint a line or a mark so that it would be fresh, because I wanted that look in the painting. I didn't like the tired, labored look in the painting. I wanted the paint to go on that way because it



was part of that whole attitude about energy. I wanted the illusion of energy in the painting and of immediacy, because seeing is immediate. But you could paint seeing so that it didn't appear to be immediate.

[00:21:53.58]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Yes, it's a very interesting thing, the whole business of illusion and reality.

[00:21:58.79]

JANET FISH: Yeah.

[00:21:59.18]

BARBARA SHIKLER: And the two different sensibilities, the artists and the viewers.

[00:22:03.05]

JANET FISH: The painting is a reality. It's real, and it's there. And then you read in it, things that you read—I mean, I always think of the actor who says "hello" and how many ways you can say "hello," and how much you can tell by that word, as an actor's coming into the room and saying "hello." And it's done with the inflection of the voice, and the gesture of the body, and those things, that gestures, read to people. And they pick up whatever it is. And that's what I mean. The viewer doesn't always know what they're seeing. But in some ways, the artist does have to know what they're doing. [Laughs.]

[00:22:50.24]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Indeed. I think we're going to stop here for reasons of time. Let's stop right now and get together another time.

[00:22:58.91]

JANET FISH: Okay.

[END OF TRACK AAA\_fish88\_3832\_m]

[00:00:04.93]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Wednesday, March 2, 1988. Interview number three with Janet Fish in her studio at 101 Prince Street. Barbara Shikler speaking.

[Recorder stops; restarts.]

Good morning.

[00:00:19.17]

JANET FISH: Good morning.

[00:00:20.43]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Just let's start off with a few little trivial things that we didn't get in the first couple of interviews. You mentioned your uncle Clark. And I need to know his wife's name, I suppose, just for the record. You said she's a painter.

[00:00:34.35]

JANET FISH: Well, his first wife was named Byllee, B-Y-L-L-E-E.

[00:00:41.22]

BARBARA SHIKLER: And your brother, the clergyman?

[00:00:43.68]

JANET FISH: His name is Winthrop.

[00:00:45.27]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Okay.

[00:00:46.59]

JANET FISH: And my sister you have, I guess.

[00:00:48.36]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Alida.

[00:00:48.78]

JANET FISH: Yes.

[00:00:49.11]

BARBARA SHIKLER: And when we were talking about Yale, you mentioned as your teachers, you mentioned Katz, Pearlstein, Bernard Chaet, William Bailey. Were there others that we should get in?

[00:01:04.20]

JANET FISH: Well, I'm not sure if Bailey was exactly a teacher. He was an assistant.

[00:01:07.98]

BARBARA SHIKLER: An assistant, yes.

[00:01:09.24]

JANET FISH: Si Sillman was teaching there at the time. Someone called Hannes Beckmann taught there. George Schueler, Esteban Vicente.

[00:01:21.33]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Yeah, I mentioned him, too.

[00:01:22.68]

JANET FISH: Yeah. And so there were a bunch of people.

[00:01:26.01]

BARBARA SHIKLER: All right. Your friend, your next door friend in Connecticut, Johanna Franchetti?

[00:01:32.97]

JANET FISH: Yeah.

[00:01:33.63]

BARBARA SHIKLER: What was her father's name?

[00:01:34.71]

JANET FISH: Her father's name was Arnold Franchetti.

[00:01:37.52]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Okay. And the cowboy, I loved your cowboy who rescued your painting from Richard Serra.

[00:01:43.58]

JANET FISH: Oh, Paul Zavorskas. [Laughs.] He wasn't really a cowboy. He was really a baseball player, but—[Laughs.]

[00:01:50.31]

BARBARA SHIKLER: I loved the idea of him as being called a cowboy. He must have been—well, you called him the "Hulk" as well. [They laugh.]

[00:01:55.86]

JANET FISH: Yeah, the "Hulk."

[00:01:56.34]

BARBARA SHIKLER: So that describes him sufficiently. You know the other things we talked about were your various apartments with hookers on one side and an assortment of other things, and the loft on Jefferson Street. Would you like to give us a couple of addresses? One day, a researcher may want to come and look at your building.

[00:02:13.54]

JANET FISH: I don't know if the buildings still exist. I can't remember the address on 13th Street. It was between Third Avenue and Second Avenue, I believe. And the 76 Jefferson, I'm not sure if that building still stands. They once had a show at the Modern of paintings done by people who lived in 76 Jefferson.

[00:02:37.29]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Oh, really?

[00:02:38.05]

JANET FISH: Camped out, you might say, there. [Laughs.]

[00:02:39.99]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Is that—that's not—no, you had Close here at first.

[00:02:44.89]

JANET FISH: Yeah.

[00:02:45.31]

BARBARA SHIKLER: I remember that. You worked at a real estate agency. Do you know the name of that? Do you remember?

[00:02:52.32]

JANET FISH: Let me see. It's something and Ives. It was a big one.

[00:02:56.05]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Douglas, Gibbon, and Ives, is that it?

[00:02:57.82]

JANET FISH: Yeah. Yeah.

[00:02:58.30]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Okay. That's the Rhode Island fiasco.

[00:03:02.08]

JANET FISH: Right.

[00:03:05.29]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Okay. All right, then we get to more of the things that are really pertinent to your life as a painter. I did want to ask you about your assistant. You described how you stretch your canvas and how you apply the ground, et cetera. And I wondered what

your assistant does. You sound like you do a great deal of the grubby work.

[00:03:28.72]

JANET FISH: Oh. Well, my assistant does bookkeeping, mainly. He keeps this kind of very complicated sheets of paper in which he writes down all the expenditures and the date, and he balances the checkbook. And I have a little corporation, and he does all the bookkeeping for that, which he then hands over to the accountant at the end of the year. And I don't know—the law has changed now. But he was doing a travel and entertainment sheet, you know? So anything that would happen on days—and this is all on the chance that somebody wants to audit me, that I can overwhelm them with records. [Laughs.]

[00:04:11.17]

BARBARA SHIKLER: You bet. And possibilities are always there. I think it's so funny the way artists are. As opposed to the popular image of artists having no eye or ear for anything involving their finances, it's often just the opposite.

[00:04:25.04]

JANET FISH: Well, I wasn't very good at it in the beginning. I got an accountant after I did my taxes. And I went over and over them. And though I hadn't earned anything much that year, I figured out that the IRS owed me \$300. And I had it all written out, you know? And I crossed everything out with Clorox, you know, and whited it out and everything. I looked at it and said it's impossible that they owe when I haven't—

[00:04:52.86]

So after that, I got an accountant. And I have to say that I'm not very good at it, but I didn't have the sense to hire somebody who works for somebody else who also has very good record keeping, because he also works for Chuck Close, who's been audited a lot. So we always do everything the way Chuck does it.

[00:05:15.12]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Yeah, I see. They audit dentists and artists, I think.

[00:05:19.61]

JANET FISH: They audit artists a lot. Apparently, a lot of trainees practice on artists because they're small businesses.

[00:05:28.20]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Yes.

[00:05:29.00]

JANET FISH: And then they can go and extrapolate from that. And then the other reason is that they keep thinking that there's all this cash in the economy, and it must be the artists.

[00:05:37.03]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Clearly, you know, that transactions are not necessarily recorded, or et cetera, et cetera.

[00:05:42.51]

JANET FISH: Yeah.

[00:05:43.43]

BARBARA SHIKLER: So then as you go through the course of your day, you make little notes in a book about how much you've spent on car fare, or if you treated somebody?

[00:05:51.80]

JANET FISH: No, I'm not very good about that, but I do try and keep stubs for things if I can

remember.

[00:05:58.75]

BARBARA SHIKLER: It's such a bore, isn't it? I hate doing that myself. I wanted to ask you about commissioned work. Are you commissioned?

[00:06:10.69]

JANET FISH: I haven't been commissioned very much. I once had a commission from Heublein to paint their Keystone brands or whatever. Anyway, they mailed me all the Keystone brands. [Laughs.] And they mailed me an A-1 Sauce under separate cover. [They laugh.] They called up and they said, "We've been discussing this project. We think Kentucky Fried Chicken would be—"

[00:06:35.66]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Oh my, how funny.

[00:06:37.01]

JANET FISH: This is when I was only painting bottles. So I just painted the bottles I liked the best, which were Don Q Rum and something else, and presented them with that, and just figured if they liked it, fine. If they didn't, I still would have done a painting.

[00:06:53.75]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Did they?

[00:06:54.65]

JANET FISH: Yeah, so they did, and it was fine. And they took the painting.

[00:06:57.47]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Was it an ad?

[00:06:58.25]

JANET FISH: No, it wasn't an ad. It was just for their collection.

[00:07:00.77]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Oh, how nice. That's lovely.

[00:07:02.72]

JANET FISH: Yeah, yeah. And other than that, I really haven't done any commissions.

[00:07:08.14]

BARBARA SHIKLER: That's it?

[00:07:09.32]

JANET FISH: Yeah.

[00:07:09.79]

BARBARA SHIKLER: So no private collectors come and say to you—well, I can almost imagine what your response would be if somebody said, "Paint me a table full of this and that." You would say, "the hell with it, I won't."

[00:07:20.60]

JANET FISH: Well, no one has. I mean, I would always consider something, if it fit in my work. But if it didn't fit, then you'd be stuck with a painting that you didn't—and then the gamble is that they wouldn't like it, either, and you don't like it. And there you are, and no

one likes it.

[00:07:42.30]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Yes. This is the danger of commissioned stuff.

[00:07:45.00]

JANET FISH: So it's better not to. So as long as I was able to—I've always felt that I was perfectly willing to do a commission as long as it fit into what I was doing, anyway, and I did it my way, and no one minded.

[00:07:59.46]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Now that you're involved with more paintings of the human form, I wondered if that would come up, for instance, even between painters, for instance. Do you paint—when you paint your friends—you have painted your friends, clearly.

[00:08:16.47]

JANET FISH: Yeah.

[00:08:16.68]

BARBARA SHIKLER: The Barry Yourgrau painting, and various others in Vermont, et cetera. Are those paintings that people want after you've done them, and do you obey?

[00:08:30.03]

JANET FISH: No, no. The people who I've painted all have no money, so we can just—I don't believe I've painted anybody who's in a position to buy a painting.

[00:08:40.19]

BARBARA SHIKLER: But you do trade occasionally. You did say that.

[00:08:42.78]

JANET FISH: I trade with people, but not on that scale, which is I've always traded small works. And it's a big commitment to trade a work that would take a month's work.

[00:08:53.40]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Indeed, it is. Indeed.

[00:08:54.75]

JANET FISH: I haven't really done that.

[00:08:56.78]

BARBARA SHIKLER: How about the four ladies? I hate to call them "ladies." It always starts to sound arch, which I suppose it is. I'm referring to the paintings done by you and Nancy Hagin, Sondra Freckelton, Harriet Shorr.

[00:09:11.51]

JANET FISH: Well, for a long time—I had been thinking for a long time that it would be fun to have a show, a still life show where there were objects the same, because all of us—well, everybody, not just those four people—But I'm always trading objects with people. I borrow things from Harriet. She borrows them from me. I borrow from Hunt Slonem, and he's borrowed from me, Altoon Sultan—all these people we've always been borrowing back and forth.

[00:09:39.90]

And I always thought it'd be quite amusing to have a show in which the same objects were appearing in several paintings. So this was one little thought. But we were all on a panel on

women still life painters, probably. So it was the four of us on this panel. And afterwards, we went and had a drink in a bar, and started chattering away.

[00:10:00.81]

And we came up with this idea. And at first, it was going to be our little joke. We were going to each put an object—we were talking about how people always assumed—people relate to the subject and don't know how different a painting is. And we thought it would be interesting—that we know if four people paint the same objects is you're not going to have the same painting.

[00:10:22.04]

So then we thought it would be fun to do this. We'd each pick an object, put it in a box, send it around, and paint it. And none of us would see the paintings that the others had done until we had all finished. And then we were all going to be showing that year, and we were just going to have the paintings in our show as a joke. But somehow, we ended up having the paintings in a show together.

[00:10:47.56]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Yes, at Tatistcheff?

[00:10:48.50]

JANET FISH: But even so, it was kind of a joke because it took quite a few people—it took several people a while to even figure out what was happening. People would walk in—And the only reason they got it, I think, was the one very distinctive object, this fish vase. And all of a sudden, people would realize that they'd seen the fish vase in several paintings. That was the object that Sondra Freckelton had picked. And that must have been her little joke. And then Harriet had the platter, the blue platter. And Nancy Hagin's was a large earthenware jug. And I had put in two glass candlesticks. And what we were supposed to put in were objects that we were going to paint, but hadn't painted yet, so that we wouldn't have painted any of the objects in the painting before the painting.

[00:11:40.20]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Well, what I was curious about—well, you mentioned that it was shown at Tatistcheff. And in the light of the fact that here you were all women—

[00:11:51.56]

JANET FISH: Uh-huh [affirmative].

[00:11:52.40]

BARBARA SHIKLER: —what some of the dynamics were when you saw your work up on the wall? How it worked as far as—

[00:11:59.07]

JANET FISH: I think women may be more generous to each other than men. I mean, I was dying. I didn't see all the paintings until the show. Harriet was itching to see my painting while I was still working.

[00:12:10.11]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Yes, you were mentioning that.

[00:12:11.01]

JANET FISH: And she came, and I kept saying, no, no. So she wasn't allowed to see it, either. But I think we were very interested in each other's paintings, you know? And it is an interesting way to define yourself here for other people working in the same kind of genre, in a sense.

[00:12:30.84]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Even though the world might look and say collectively, "women artists," quote, unquote.

[00:12:36.33]

JANET FISH: Yeah. But that wasn't the issue in this one. The issue really here was how differently people would paint the same things.

[00:12:46.43]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Also, I remember your saying something to the extent that so often, people will look at—especially abstractionists, Abstract Expressionists—would look at a realist object and think that the painting was just about that, not recognizing some of its abstract qualities.

[00:13:07.49]

JANET FISH: Yeah. Because of photography, people sort of assume the reality of a photograph. And they don't understand how much of a selection process is involved even in a photograph. And they—in my opinion, you're never painting reality. You're always painting *out of*—let's call it—reality. You know, you're pulling things out of it. But you're creating a reality on the canvas. After all, it is flat, and it's a flat piece of canvas, and it's all an illusion.

[00:13:41.28]

BARBARA SHIKLER: The perception is that it's the abstractionist who would recognize the abstract spatial qualities going on.

[00:13:51.42]

JANET FISH: Yeah, no, they don't.

[00:13:52.08]

BARBARA SHIKLER: But so often, it's they who miss it. And they think that if you're dealing with an object, then the painting is about the object.

[00:13:58.20]

JANET FISH: I would have said [inaudible] was so great what happened. There's so many kinds of painting going on that it's made it so free for all of us to do what we want. But actually what happens is that it's made many people stupider about painting. Whereas in the past when people were painting all images, there was a very critical eye put to the way an image was done.

[00:14:19.56]

Now, I go to a show, and if someone's painting a figure, and they've done it very tight, and they shaded it—everything up to the edge, and it's all very neat, no one cares that the foot is kind of tiny, and awkward, and primitive, and twisted, or that the arm—the perspective is all wrong. Everyone will walk in there and say, oh, this is such a—either they'll say, "I'm bored," or they'll say, "This person is so talented." Look at—and they're impressed by the technique, this kind of form of rendering. And there's no eye there. Whereas I think in the past, people were able to walk in, and they looked there, and they could see right away what I think is fairly apparent, that someone was inept at comprehending something that they were drawing or painting.

[00:15:05.19]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Do you think there's a better ability now, than—is this what you're saying, that people are more capable of exploring, examining, and recognizing in a non-figurative painting the elements of design and form?

[00:15:20.75]

JANET FISH: Um—I think people—what's happened is, instead of opening it up—is, I mean, besides people sort of not having to train, like the audience having a trained eye for only one



kind of painting instead of being able to look at lots of different kinds. I think that's one of the results. And then how did that question go, again?

[00:15:42.70]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Well, whether people are more capable of examining and understanding a painting that is non-figurative.

[00:15:48.53]

JANET FISH: I don't even think that, actually. I don't think that. I think it's led to all a kind of weird confusion, you know what I mean? There are so many sort of kitschy ideas around. And it's a lot of—not everybody's doing it, you know? But I mean, there's an enormous amount of jumping from one sort of kitschy, fashionable thing. I think the whole thing has become a matter of fashion more than anything. Painting has always been—arts have always been locked into fashion in some way, but maybe not as strongly as we are now.

[00:16:26.22]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Well, I think that's quite true. It occurred to me that so often, for instance, in the past, geography allowed a contained kind of work to go on in one area.

[00:16:41.62]

JANET FISH: Right.

[00:16:42.22]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Venetians painted like Venetians, and Florentines painted like Florentines, and you knew. And history has, in fact, winnowed them all out for us so they're much more—

[00:16:52.75]

JANET FISH: Yes. We don't need to see the bad paintings, which there was.

[00:16:54.88]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Exactly, exactly, exactly, although I suppose it wasn't as widespread. However, there was a crossing over. Clearly, you could see that. If you were to winnow today, if you had the chance to winnow out as history has done for us, would you see any particular currents that you feel are strongest, and best exemplified by particular painters, if you wanted to get into that?

[00:17:19.32]

JANET FISH: Well, I think—I mean, my feeling is, as watching these kinds of styles that are coming and going, some styles really had very little in them, some approaches in them, to sustain interest for any long period of time. And then others had more. And then I think in practically all these different movements that come through, there's been at least one or two people that have transcended the movement, in a sense. So that with Photorealism, which I think was, in some ways, had not that much nourishment in the end, then you do get someone like Estes. Or if you want to call Chuck Close a Photorealist, I don't know. He's also a Minimalist, you know.

[00:18:07.61]

Or I think of Pop, and you think of people like Wesselmann, you know, who kept going. Somehow, he was sort of a Pop artist, but not some other kind of artist. I mean, there are people who go along with that. And the Abstract Expressionist, I think we've come to see that some of them are better than others.

But then the interesting thing is even there, thinking of that, is I went down to Yale to see the—I think it was Sheeler show. Anyway, I went down to the basement, and there were all these paintings from the '50s and '60s and '70s—the big—an example each of everything that had been tops, kind of thing. And it's like this dreary gallery with these paintings that are not wearing well. They're getting a little tarnished physically as well as in one's mind.

There's no one looking at them. No one was down there looking. There wasn't one soul. There were just these dreary paintings all lined up—great, empty stretches of color, and one color, or whatever. And it wasn't holding up.

[00:19:23.20]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Do you remember the artists that were there that you're speaking about?

[00:19:27.37]

JANET FISH: Well, there were a lot of them. I was thinking of those stripe paintings, you know, Stella. I'm trying to think of all that was there. It was such a dreary show. Mostly, I just felt like I was looking at a lot of icons and things, examples of what everyone was excited about.

[00:19:55.66]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Do you feel that there's a place for them historically, though, in what they've led to?

[00:20:02.32]

JANET FISH: Well, it's going to depend on whether the historical way of looking at things continues to be the kind of historical thing that we've been involved with, which is the constantly trying to look for—well, historians look at such a linear way. They want to see one thing leading to another. They don't like too many divergences. They don't like things that don't fit.

[00:20:30.12]

BARBARA SHIKLER: They'd have a hell of a time with today. [Laughs.]

[00:20:31.64]

JANET FISH: Yeah. And so if we keep on thinking of art in this sort of Darwinian way, then perhaps they'll make something of it. Or there could be some—I can see that in another 50 years, people are looking at painting differently. And there's not going to be much interest in a lot of things that happened.

[00:20:56.69]

BARBARA SHIKLER: There's a kind of an anarchy that's born out of it, the lack of a geographical containment today. In that sense, people are thrown into a world in which the power—I think power used to be lodged in the head of a nation, let's say, and later in discrete geographical places. And today, it's lodged in a very capricious sort of market—

[00:21:25.95]

JANET FISH: Yeah.

[00:21:26.74]

BARBARA SHIKLER: —gallery dealers, collectors, all of whom are very intent upon being more current than anyone else, if there is such a thing.

[00:21:34.99]

JANET FISH: I think that that is what—and it's gotten more like that now, I think, than it was just in the time that I feel like I've been watching it. And I do think it's true that there is that with all this diversity, it's been made possible for some very interesting art to happen—not always things that maybe are as successful as other things on the marketplace. But I think that there is a kind of thing happening that is interesting from it all.

[00:22:11.02]

But that's the good side of it. And then the bad side is that there's just a lot of hustling

around. People learn, like a student now will learn to handle the fashion world, in a sense—to get right into the New York scene. And you really have to get right in there, and case the scene out, and begin to go with it to make a success. I think of people like Longo and people who've been able to really—flew into that. And then there are other people who don't. I think there was more room—maybe I'm wrong about that. It seemed to me that there might have been more room for not being quite as fashionable before, but I might be wrong.

[00:23:04.22]

BARBARA SHIKLER: I think to some extent, you're discussing time, too—time for the artist to mature, to explore, to develop. There's less time now.

[00:23:14.58]

JANET FISH: There's less time, and it's unfortunate. Sometimes you see an artist, and the critics are tired of them because they've written about them before. And that was earlier work. And then the artist finally gets their act together and they really do a good show. I've seen this happen with several people. And that show is totally ignored by everybody.

[00:23:34.30]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Who are you thinking of, Janet?

[00:23:35.05]

JANET FISH: Well, I just thought of—once, John Moore had a show, and I thought he'd finally pulled all of his imagery together, and it was really together. And he'd been getting reviews before that. And all of a sudden—I mean this is one example—he does this really good show, and no one went into it. And I think this happens quite a bit, because they've written about him before and they just weren't interested, you know?

[00:23:54.91]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Fear of being old hat?

[00:23:56.53]

JANET FISH: Yeah.

[00:23:57.76]

BARBARA SHIKLER: So the artist is really at the mercy of fashion, even while courting it. Especially while courting it, he's at its mercy.

[00:24:10.60]

JANET FISH: Yeah, I think the artists are. And some of them enjoy it, and some don't. Some go with it, and some don't. I maintain that if you maintain some integrity and separate yourself a bit from fashion, it gives you a strength at least to be yourself.

[00:24:31.51]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Well, so many people are going into it today who might not have stuck it through, were they able to or were they forced to explore, and develop, and spend time rather than showbiz. It might have been really an aesthetic thing.

[00:24:47.33]

JANET FISH: Well, they wouldn't. And actually, they won't. See, this is the other thing. Because all we have to do is pick up a magazine, and there are people that you don't see anymore. You pick them up from ten years ago. And you're saying, "Well, what ever happened to—" I went to a show, and there was a show at Kenkeleba House of artists who showed and lived in the Lower East Side in the '50s and '60s, which I was part of, because I did. And you think, "Whatever became of—" And you're just looking at this line of paintings of people.

[00:25:17.76]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Yeah, yeah, yeah. What struck me recently, I went to the Whitney to see the Sheeler show.

[00:25:23.98]

JANET FISH: Uh-huh [affirmative].

[00:25:24.62]

BARBARA SHIKLER: And it struck me that there were so many people trying to do what he did, and did consistently for so long. They come and go. They nip in and nip out.

[00:25:33.89]

JANET FISH: Yeah.

[00:25:34.22]

BARBARA SHIKLER: And there he was developing and growing. I don't know what you think of his work.

[00:25:38.15]

JANET FISH: Oh, I love it, yeah.

[00:25:39.02]

BARBARA SHIKLER: I thought it was a very exciting show, very interesting.

[00:25:41.51]

JANET FISH: Yeah, I haven't seen that one. But I'm not sure if it's the same show that was in New Haven or not, but I loved the other one.

[00:25:49.79]

BARBARA SHIKLER: This one included some of his photography, as well as some of those drawings that looked so much like photographs of the sections of his wife's anatomy which were so interesting.

[00:26:01.61]

JANET FISH: Oh, well, this is a more extensive show.

[00:26:03.53]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Yeah, it's worth seeing. Let's pause.

[Recorder stops; restarts.]

[00:26:10.67]

I was going to ask you—well, you've more or less indicated all along what painters you feel are important. Specificity, if possible, today—working today, whom you admire and feel are —

[00:26:30.91]

JANET FISH: Well, this is always kind of difficult because it often has to do with what shows I've seen recently.

[00:26:39.31]

BARBARA SHIKLER: I think we said this before.

[00:26:44.85]

JANET FISH: Yeah. I was reminded of Joan Mitchell's paintings again because I'd seen the show in the '70s and really loved it. And now there's one traveling around, and I saw the

catalog, and I remembered that I liked those paintings. I don't know. I mean, there are so many good people. It's just a little hard to jump in. I mean, there are people—I feel that there's artists that I admire, and don't relate the work to my own work. And then there's artists that I don't even admire, but relate the work to my own work.

[00:27:20.80]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Sure.

[00:27:21.43]

JANET FISH: So that there are ways of looking at shows. I mean, there's a way of going to the show and just thinking it's just an absolutely terrific thing, because this person has really done what they wanted to do. And it has nothing to do with me at all, but I really am excited about it. I like to see a really good show.

[00:27:38.36]

BARBARA SHIKLER: But when I ask you something like that, what I really mean, I carry with me the image of what you said about seeing that show of a couple of painters from each school, let's say, who were in this show, which 20 years later looks so dreary to you and don't live, in a sense.

[00:27:59.42]

JANET FISH: Oh, yeah. Yeah.

[00:27:59.75]

BARBARA SHIKLER: I was thinking of if you could put together a show 20 years hence, who might live, even if you don't particularly like them? But those who have a kind of power in painting, have a power in painting.

[00:28:20.66]

JANET FISH: I guess I put Chuck Close in that group. And I was thinking of some easy choices. I think Nancy Graves' things will probably look good. Some work seems more intelligent than others, or just tighter, more tightly put together.

[00:28:46.71]

BARBARA SHIKLER: You mean hers, or—

[00:28:47.76]

JANET FISH: No.

[00:28:48.09]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Artists in general.

[00:28:48.87]

JANET FISH: Artists in general. I mean, I love that Lucian Freud show.

[00:28:59.03]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Yes.

[00:28:59.79]

JANET FISH: I went to that show prepared to hate it, because John Russell blathers on as usual about English artists, and he made such a big deal about it. And I went in there saying, "I'm sure I'm going to hate this show." And I didn't. I loved it. I mean, Red Grooms, I think, will always hold interest one way or another. But it's really hard to say, because, I mean, if I were thinking this way, I would have to take a long time to put it together.

[00:29:34.15]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Yes. Yeah. Maybe you'll think of it later. Maybe you'll put together a show one day. I don't know that any painter ever has long-range goals that can be clearly articulated, but certainly we can talk about some of the paintings that you're working on that might lead to others, if you can see what they might lead to. I know that you bounce one off the other and keep them around you.

[00:30:05.96]

JANET FISH: Well, it's really hard to say. I just finished a couple of paintings. Right now what I've been doing is doing watercolors, and trying to see if they would alter my painting, the watercolor technique would help loosen up. I felt a need to change. And first, I changed subject, in a sense, because that can change your approach, too.

[00:30:32.34]

BARBARA SHIKLER: You mean the introduction of the figure?

[00:30:33.90]

JANET FISH: Yeah, bringing the figure in kind of brought something in. But I decided that was a false change. So then I started working with these watercolors, and now I'm beginning to think that for me, it's making a change in my work—that now I've done quite a few of them. If I do a few more and keep alternating back and forth, it'll have something to do with the flow of the paint, which is something I'm very interested in. And I felt that in moving, and doing the figure, and bringing in some of this other subject matter, that the paintings had tightened up more than I'd wanted them to. So this will break it, break the painting open again for me.

[00:31:18.03]

BARBARA SHIKLER: You once mentioned in one of our talks, you mentioned that the watercolor committed you to something, because it's mark was so inflexible, as it were.

[00:31:28.81]

JANET FISH: Yeah.

[00:31:28.91]

BARBARA SHIKLER: It just sort of stayed there, and you couldn't manipulate it. Is that what you mean?

[00:31:34.28]

JANET FISH: Well, in a sense, it's required—it's putting a mark down and leaving it, you know, and building the—In a sense, it's required some—I'm not sure if it's greater attention. But let's say that it's a new skill. And that new skill might carry over in a way that I felt like—one thing I really don't like—and I suppose it is—is I don't like a very tightly modeled form. And I felt like I had slid into that a bit on some of the figure painting. And what I want to do is go back to it and open it up again.

[00:32:18.36]

BARBARA SHIKLER: So freshness as really freshness, rather than applied effort to create an illusion.

[00:32:24.86]

JANET FISH: No, this is an enormous amount of effort. [Laughs.]

[00:32:27.24]

BARBARA SHIKLER: No, I don't mean that. But once it's down, it's down.

[00:32:32.40]

JANET FISH: It is down. It's hard to explain. It really has to do with the whole set of one's

head as you're painting. I feel that there are times when in oneself, you're so together that everything just flows, and that it's hard to achieve that place, and it's easy to lose it. And it's easy to get involved, in a sense, in details, and lose this kind of overall flow of concentration, and energy, or whatever it is that happens when everything flows together.

[00:33:19.26]

For me, trying to have the mark relate very specifically to the feeling of the form, in a sense—that's what I relate, in a sense, to things that, as I understand it, about Japanese brush painting, and things where the spirit of the form is in the mark. And I felt that I was moving away from that and getting involved in other things. I want to bring that kind of attitude back into the painting.

[00:33:46.74]

BARBARA SHIKLER: When you do watercolors, are you working with the figure as well?

[00:33:50.86]

JANET FISH: I haven't yet, but I suppose I will.

[00:33:55.71]

BARBARA SHIKLER: It should really produce an enormous change.

[00:33:58.38]

JANET FISH: Well, I'm really just doing—I'm really trying to get a control of the way I want to use the technique, which is not maybe necessarily good watercolor technique. But what I want, I'm trying to get a control of that more than—so I've worked with something very static like the still life—just very static. It allows me freedom to move with the brush.

[00:34:22.73]

BARBARA SHIKLER: It occurred to me when listening to what we were talking about, you were describing the way in which you began to establish the way you painted when you introduced the figure—that you would do the surrounding areas first off, and then use the camera to record a posture.

[00:34:42.75]

JANET FISH: Right.

[00:34:42.90]

BARBARA SHIKLER: And it reminded me so much of those discussions of plein-air painting, for instance, around the time of Corot, let's say. He would do a lot of—the paintings would be done to some extent outside, and to some extent in the studio. And I wondered whether when you talked about this, what you were afraid was happening just now when you spoke about you were afraid what was happening, whether it wasn't a sort of a dichotomy for you, so that you had two sensibilities working—one in response to some extent to a dictatorship of the camera.

[00:35:15.06]

JANET FISH: Yeah. Well, the camera, what I really try to do is not have too much of the camera there. There is a dictatorship of the camera. First of all, it's a very select—the camera selects, and massively—much more, I think, than people even realize. And things are changing constantly when I'm looking at them. They're never the same, ever, from day to day or minute to minute. And in the camera, they're always the same, I mean, once the photograph's been taken. I really think that the camera is only going to be useful to sketch the outline in of the form, or to start on the composition. And then I really need the person there for the painting. I can't rely on the camera.

[00:36:02.97]

BARBARA SHIKLER: So it's again, then, perhaps a return to paintings done, keeping several

paintings going at one time, and returning to them at various times during the daylight, or—

[00:36:15.84]

JANET FISH: Yeah. Well, I don't need it for the specific time. I just need the person. You know, you can't ask too much of a model.

[00:36:24.66]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Yeah. But the person in relationship to everything else that you're doing, because a sort of integrity is broken, as it were.

[00:36:31.75]

JANET FISH: Yeah. Well, I feel the best figure paintings I did were when the model was there the whole time, and I wasn't using any of the camera at all. So that to me was the best painting of the figure.

[00:36:45.87]

BARBARA SHIKLER: It seemed also that there were some distortions such as the enlargement of things in the foreground, which you might not have chosen to do had not the camera in some way—

[00:36:56.04]

JANET FISH: No. Well, actually, none of the things would be part of the—the only thing that would be photographed would be the figure.

[00:37:02.30]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Well, I meant the distortion, let's say, of hands in the foreground being larger than they might have, were you working directly from the model.

[00:37:10.61]

JANET FISH: I actually think that, well, the couple of times where the hands were very big, that actually, I know with Toby, with the paintings of those children, that I actually reduced the size of everything in the camera. But I think that the first few figure paintings I was doing, I focused a lot on the hands, and that they became, in a sense, too important.

[00:37:41.15]

BARBARA SHIKLER: I was thinking of that sulky model whose name I don't remember.

[00:37:44.67]

JANET FISH: Darlene.

[00:37:45.00]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Darlene.

[00:37:45.41]

JANET FISH: That was my very first figure painting, yes.

[00:37:47.23]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Yes, and that struck me then.

[00:37:51.60]

JANET FISH: That painting was not done with a photograph at all, you see.

[00:37:54.69]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Oh.



[00:37:56.52]

JANET FISH: She was there. That was the first figure painting I did in about 20 years, so it was—let me see. No, I did Charles first, and then Darlene's was the second one. And so I really feel that that hand, that I just focused on it.

[00:38:15.87]

BARBARA SHIKLER: I see. You were the camera.

[00:38:18.06]

JANET FISH: Yeah.

[00:38:18.54]

BARBARA SHIKLER: "I am a camera." So just to get back to the watercolors, do you have a concept of where they'll lead you? Do you have a feeling about what you want from them?

[00:38:29.58]

JANET FISH: Yeah, no, I have a feeling of what I want from them. But whether I can articulate this very well or not, I don't know, because a lot of what I want has to do with the spirit of the paint rather than anything else. And that's what I'm using it for. So it may be a big change for me and no one else may notice a thing.

[00:38:53.08]

BARBARA SHIKLER: I'm sure everyone will notice it, because at each point where there has been a change, it's been very, very clearly. So I want to use the word "energy" again, because you've used it so much. And I have the feeling that with the things that will come about as a result of watercolors, it's a kind of a restoration of a certain kind of energy which has been I shouldn't say it, but perhaps a little reduced. I'm not sure.

[00:39:20.72]

JANET FISH: Yeah. Well, I think in becoming involved with kinds of ideas about structure, and other things which are interesting also in the painting, I forgot something that I want to return, bring back in, and hopefully bring in, and keep what I got along the way. Because as far as I'm concerned, I mean, the whole thing is just to keep changing and growing with the painting, so that I don't want to—I have great criticisms of all my paintings. [Laughs.]

[00:39:56.92]

BARBARA SHIKLER: I suppose that's natural.

[00:39:58.95]

JANET FISH: But I've also learned in New York that you shouldn't criticize your own work. [Laughs.]

[00:40:03.08]

BARBARA SHIKLER: At least not out loud, you mean.

[00:40:05.73]

JANET FISH: Right.

[00:40:05.94]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Oh, yes. There's so much discussion by artists of their own work. The printed word, as Tom Wolfe would have said, is so powerful that sometimes you can't see the whole thing without the lines that tell you what it's all about.

[00:40:28.00]

JANET FISH: Yeah.

[00:40:28.69]

BARBARA SHIKLER: A very difficult business.

[00:40:29.86]

JANET FISH: Well, I mean, ideally, I think the painting has to be able to stand on its own, and then be enhanced by knowledge about the work, rather than you have to know about the painting, and then it looks okay. That's why I think that some paintings don't last well after ten or twenty years, because they needed so much of the whole gestalt of the time to exist.

[00:41:00.96]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Yeah, yeah. So without the language of the critics, and the historians, and the aesthetes—

[00:41:06.33]

JANET FISH: They don't exist. Yeah, the paintings won't exist.

[00:41:10.38]

BARBARA SHIKLER: And so many reputations are so interdependent because of that, in fact.

[00:41:14.77]

JANET FISH: Yeah. Well, I remember going to a party, and I think it was David Bourdon said, "Well, the artists should not get a percentage of the art. The critics should get it, because they make the artist's reputation." [They laugh.]

[00:41:24.67]

BARBARA SHIKLER: That's not too far afield, not too far afield at all. Several things, several things nudge their way in. Again, always, the subject of being a woman who is a painter, and then being called a woman painter.

[00:41:47.17]

JANET FISH: Well, I think that this is a really lousy time that way. I don't know if I talked about it before, but I've been in shows where I'll be the only woman. And in that case, I'll also be the only person who seems to have been influenced by anyone. Everyone else will have just risen tall with their brand-new ideas out of nothing. And someone will either rightly or wrongly decide who has influenced me, sometimes quite wrongly. And I found that this is something that—I think everybody has come from somewhere. But this is a sign of an attitude, so that I'm very resentful.

[00:42:28.66]

BARBARA SHIKLER: How do you reconcile that to the business of being a woman who paints? And is it necessarily pejorative?

[00:42:37.06]

JANET FISH: To be a woman that paints?

[00:42:38.30]

BARBARA SHIKLER: No, no, to be able to identify the sources of the work correctly, if possible, certainly.

[00:42:50.45]

JANET FISH: Well, the thing is in identifying the sources, the whole problem is that one has a lot of sources when one is a student, and you're putting everything together. And then later on, you actually take off from a base in which you kind of leave your base behind. Like just like a rocket launch, you're taking off, and you're going somewhere. And you're really not—at that point, you build, you start following your own trains of thought, and you make yourself. You're not being made by someone else. You're making yourself.

[00:43:22.76]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Oh, I see what you're saying. So it's perceived as a kind of a dependency—

[00:43:25.57]

JANET FISH: Yes.

[00:43:26.48]

BARBARA SHIKLER: —rather than—

[00:43:28.94]

JANET FISH: Whereas a man can be acknowledged as a genius who thought of everything himself, whether he did or not. You don't find women being written about that way or thought about that way. And that's a lack of respect. Whether—it has nothing to do with the truth of the matter, which is the truth, I believe, is that everybody was influenced by different people. I mean, I was just looking at Clemente and Frida Kahlo. I saw the interview thing was Clemente on it in a Frida Kahlo book. And you've got to say that whether Clemente has mentioned her or not, he's drawing himself like he was Frida Kahlo, you know?

[00:44:07.69]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Yes, I see what you're saying.

[00:44:09.14]

JANET FISH: And he's putting the things in the middle of the head and doing all that weird sexual thing.

[00:44:13.19]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Yes, yes, yes.

[00:44:14.53]

JANET FISH: Now, Clemente is a big guy. And everyone calls, talks about what a genius he is. And Frida Kahlo is something of an eccentric—

[00:44:23.96]

BARBARA SHIKLER: —who's espoused strongly by women—

[00:44:27.20]

JANET FISH: Right.

[00:44:27.92]

BARBARA SHIKLER: —and regarded as some sort of an adjunct to Rivera.

[00:44:34.61]

JANET FISH: Yeah. And I don't know if Clemente is—as far as I remember in the interview with Clemente, he wasn't really talking much about his sources. [Laughs.] And this is the thing.

[00:44:47.70]

BARBARA SHIKLER: So in a way, it's a sort of infantilization.

[00:44:54.26]

JANET FISH: To make the woman.

[00:44:55.01]

BARBARA SHIKLER: To make the woman, in a sense, the little girl.

[00:44:57.62]

JANET FISH: To always discuss the source is the guy that made the woman. Like, the thing that bothers me, like, I'll mention Alex Katz has been a very helpful teacher in different ways. On the other hand, I don't feel he had a lot to do with my painting. But I know that because I did that, this is what I'll get for it.

[00:45:17.45]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Well, the way I saw it, the way you spoke of it, he was an encouraging force—

[00:45:24.44]

JANET FISH: He was, yeah.

[00:45:24.71]

BARBARA SHIKLER: —in your showing, and moving out of certain constraint, but certainly nothing to do with the art itself.

[00:45:32.71]

JANET FISH: The way the art was made. And then sometimes, different times, I've mentioned artists that I was particularly looking at very hard. They didn't fit the person's idea of who influenced me. They just made up a new list.

[00:45:45.69]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Well, that's always done, I think. What seems rather peculiar to me is the eagerness for the male painter and the eyes of the male critic not to have had a source.

[00:45:59.17]

JANET FISH: Well, this is the thing. You see this is why I'm torn about it, so that I'll go into a rage when I'm reading this thing. And I'll say, all these guys had sources. I remember reading one catalog, and Rackstraw Downs is in the same thing. Now, I know all of his sources.

[00:46:14.80]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Of course.

[00:46:15.52]

JANET FISH: And why were they—and this particular catalog, which I cannot remember what show it was—They quoted me as being influenced by Joseph Raphael, of all people, who is a person I'm never influenced by.

[00:46:29.20]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Never. But then if you think back on discussions, I remember at the Barnes Foundation, discussions of Renoir were always accompanied by references to the Venetians and the relationship between the way in which paint was applied instead of a linear sort of thing.

[00:46:44.72]

JANET FISH: Yeah.

[00:46:44.84]

BARBARA SHIKLER: And that was never a pejorative.

[00:46:46.34]

JANET FISH: Well, that's fine. See, I think it should be that you could. But I don't like the situation where it's only the women, because it is, as you say, an infant—you know, it's an—

[00:46:57.08]

BARBARA SHIKLER: It's an infantilization. But in fact, I think it's all skewed around, because all art should be approached objectively, if possible, but with an eye towards that which it came out of, instead of springing full-blown, as you say, out of the blue.

[00:47:14.61]

JANET FISH: Yeah.

[00:47:15.26]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Let's pause because I think we near the end and we may as well.

[Recorder stops; restarts.]

[00:47:17.54]

JANET FISH: Okay.

[END OF TRACK AAA\_fish88\_3833\_m]

[00:00:06.45]

BARBARA SHIKLER: This is still Wednesday, March 2, the third interview with Janet Fish, side two.

[Recorder stops; restarts.]

So you were going to say something just as we turned over here about the way in which the whole thing is so mixed up now so that the historical viewpoint is misapplied when it's applied, and not applied when it ought to be, is really what you're saying.

[00:00:43.39]

JANET FISH: Right. What I would say is, if you're—I mean, if the catalog was going to discuss sources, which is a legitimate thing to do, then it should discuss the sources of everyone. I mean, but if I see the discussion of sources as being a pejorative situation when it's only applied to the only woman in the show—and then that indicates an attitude, which is prevalent. I mean, as we know, as Guerrilla Girls keeps pointing out, all the museums that aren't showing women and all the other things—and there are women making all these works that—it's the same kind of attitude as when every Mary Cassatt is discussed, they discuss Degas, but never with the same enthusiasm. I mean, I can tell a difference between a Cassatt and a Degas. There has got to be a reason.

[00:01:31.48]

But you know then you've got Monet—and you've got all those Impressionists. And then you've got the American Impressionists. And somehow we kind of—though acknowledging that thing—it never isn't quite as important to discuss all those connections. It's never considered to be quite the same way. This bothers me. Everybody came from somewhere. And I don't think it should be denied. But I read the interviews with these guys, and they don't come from anywhere.

[00:02:01.93]

BARBARA SHIKLER: No.

[00:02:02.65]

JANET FISH: And they were just geniuses from the beginning.

[00:02:05.26]

BARBARA SHIKLER: To some extent, though, that's the product of those critics who need to

discover something new, brand new that's never been done before and the galleries that need to present stuff that's never been done before so that even older artists, especially older women artists who lose their galleries, have almost no luck at all in getting new galleries.

[00:02:26.49]

JANET FISH: That's right. It's a pretty terrifying situation. And when they do a—I don't know. I think there's a falseness. And it's an attitude so that it's—and it's just an annoyance that goes on. It's part of a general social attitude towards women. And right now in these very conservative times, we've gone back to what is also unfashionable, really, to discuss the fact that there's a discrimination against women. People are bored with it. That was done a few years ago. Everyone was very enthusiastic about it in the '60s, and everyone is bored with it now. And they don't want to discuss it.

[00:03:13.72]

So if you bring it up—if I'm on a committee, for instance, and I think that there should be an equal number of women, for instance, given a job or a grant or something like that, the annoyance on the faces of everyone on the committee at this thought is quite telling. They say, "Well, we only want to consider the best. This is not what you do." And you know the names of everybody, and you know who they are. And you can't help but know.

[00:03:46.56]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Well, this is an issue that has really always been very interesting. Discussions of writers and arguments about men versus women—they'd always tell you, "But there were more men who were better writers than women." And they will still tell you.

[00:04:03.19]

JANET FISH: That's actually not true. I mean, then you have Virago Press, which keeps bringing out one—

[00:04:07.69]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Yes.

[00:04:07.91]

JANET FISH: —more terrific book after another by someone you'd never heard of before, which was just as good. I mean, try and plow through Norman Mailer, he's really—[They laugh.]

[00:04:19.02]

BARBARA SHIKLER: I surely wouldn't want to plow through another one who was a woman like Norman Mailer, although I doubt that that would be. But you will still get the argument. And that's the original question, being grouped as a woman painter—there are so many little things here, though, that will bog you down, for instance, just the women's museum. The idea of women being segregated into a museum has its own dangers.

[00:04:49.20]

JANET FISH: It has its dangers, and there's a positive side. And I consider that since really the Guggenheim is a man's museum—all these museums basically have become men's museums—that to have a women's museum is not so bad, because a lot of people—what I noticed from being on things, like being on the Skowhegan board and trying to think of who would be good to come for lectures—if you think of whoever's been in the public eye recently, if you're trying to right a wrong and include some women or something, it's nice. Just because we're all people, we just don't have everyone's name at our fingertips.

[00:05:28.30]

So to have a museum like that and to have these people there, if it was a good museum, is a good idea. There was this woman who invented Liquid Paper who started to put together a women's museum. And she started out with a core collection that was really very good. And

then she died, alas, because I think that that would've been a good one.

[00:05:49.29]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Who was that?

[00:05:49.67]

JANET FISH: It's the Gihon Foundation.

[00:05:53.79]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Oh, I know Guillen. Henry Guillen?

[00:05:55.77]

JANET FISH: G-I-H-O-N.

[00:05:57.72]

BARBARA SHIKLER: No, wrong.

[00:05:58.56]

JANET FISH: And it was in Texas. I cannot remember her name right now. But she started this thing. And what it ended up with was a really pretty nice traveling show of some very—like an important work by a number of people. And then that was it, because what once she was done, it was over. But I think there's been lots of criticism of the women's museum that it's a little ditzy, and that it has a limited collection, and all this kind of stuff. But the concept—I'm not against it. I know it seems like you're being sent into a ghetto. But sometimes you need that just to show that these people exist, because you're not going to find out they exist from the regular museum.

[00:06:46.07]

The Metropolitan Museum had the big show up in the new wing they put up. And they had so few women in it. I forget, but it was a ludicrously teeny number. Now, for instance, the curator there hates Alice Neel's work, and will not put one up or accept one as a gift. The family was going to give him a really terrific painting.

[00:07:10.37]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Oh, no.

[00:07:11.22]

JANET FISH: Would not take it. Did not want it. Now, he'll put up a Walt Kuhn painting—

[00:07:15.08]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Yes.

[00:07:15.45]

JANET FISH: —of the same pairing, which is just a wimpy, cute little painting, whereas the Alice Neel painting that he could have had was so gritty and so telling about that time—

[00:07:28.18]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Yeah.

[00:07:28.54]

JANET FISH: —so that there—she should have been in there. And she would have been better than Kuhn.

[00:07:34.63]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Yes, of course.

[00:07:35.14]

JANET FISH: That's what I don't like.

[00:07:36.79]

BARBARA SHIKLER: And even if some people perceived her not as better—but it's very hard to ignore an Alice Neel. And personal whim is what you're talking about.

[00:07:47.14]

JANET FISH: Yeah.

[00:07:47.47]

BARBARA SHIKLER: And this personal whim is often not seen politically, unfortunately, so that if you make an issue of it, it's a combination of, you're sort of tagged with the paranoid label, or one of those people who sees it as conspiracy, whereas it's really a continuing—it's a continuing tradition that's changed to some extent because of the activity. But the issue is often not seen anymore. Just, men roll their eyes. "Here's another one."

[00:08:16.03]

JANET FISH: And women roll their eyes, too—

[00:08:16.93]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Yes, and women, too.

[00:08:17.68]

JANET FISH: —because you'll be on the thing, and everyone's rolling their eyes, and indicating their boredom with the subject. And it's a real topic. In schools where there are plenty of women studying, there will be very few women teachers, still, and this just perpetuates this thing.

[00:08:36.30]

BARBARA SHIKLER: It does, indeed.

[00:08:37.42]

JANET FISH: And so I think it's going to take a long time for society to pull itself together. I think of my grandmother being so busy being a suffragette or whatever. And that was a long time ago, really, now.

[00:08:54.16]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Because it's still regarded as a movement rather than as an issue that needs to be explored. And the moment it's tagged as a movement, it loses the specificity of its subject. And it just becomes something that's encapsulated without an idea, or with just one sort of hysterical note that sounded, and it's never seen as an issue.

[00:09:18.22]

JANET FISH: Yeah. I mean, there are so many explanations of—people say, well, they can't find—I mean, I've seen it clearly with hiring women to teach art, like at Yale. They'll say, "Well, we couldn't find a good enough person." Well, someone's committed to not finding a woman who will do. They will look at every woman that appears with a very close scrutiny that they don't give to the man who appears. And then they find a guy.

[00:09:44.22]

They went and hired somebody very recently at Yale. And he was a young guy from the Midwest that you've never heard of. They have all of New York to pick from. They could have picked a well-known woman. But you know what was going to happen. That woman was



going to look like she wasn't going to fit in, because she'd probably be too aggressive. This is still said, "This person is very aggressive. This person is hard to work with."

[00:10:07.59]

And then you say—I mean, look at—I mean, this kind of phrase about aggressiveness is something that—I mean, I heard Marlborough didn't like some woman that was interested in showing there because she was too aggressive. They couldn't work with her. I mean aggressive is only bad in a woman. Who could be more aggressive than Katz or Schnabel? I mean, if we want to talk aggressive, I don't think there's a woman around who's as aggressive as those people are.

[00:10:35.71]

BARBARA SHIKLER: [Laughs.] Quite so, quite so. So it's the more things change, the more they remain the same.

[00:10:40.21]

JANET FISH: Yeah, I think that, in fact, we took many steps backward in women's rights as in everything else in the last few years.

[00:10:48.76]

BARBARA SHIKLER: And it's across the board. It isn't just in painting.

[00:10:51.24]

JANET FISH: Yeah.

[00:10:51.79]

BARBARA SHIKLER: It isn't just in the arts—

[00:10:52.99]

JANET FISH: No—

[00:10:53.29]

BARBARA SHIKLER: —although it's highly visible there, because—

[00:10:55.09]

JANET FISH: It's visible in the arts, especially. I mean, I think—I like those Guerrilla Girl posters, because they just set out statistics for the year. They print them up in big things. And you can't miss it.

[00:11:06.22]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Yeah. But it's not highly visible to most of the world, really.

[00:11:11.55]

JANET FISH: No.

[00:11:11.80]

BARBARA SHIKLER: It's not visible as information. It's visible as something with quotation marks around it rather than as issue. And I don't know what the—how it can be dealt with, other than just continuing to make the point and to paint.

[00:11:31.67]

JANET FISH: I think you have to make the point, and that each person who's aware of it has to make the point of not letting it happen. I've discovered sometimes. It's the same thing as, I've discovered—I was on a jury. And I'll vote for abstract painters, let's say, as well as realists. But the abstract painters will only vote for abstract. They will not vote for realist. So

then you're suddenly faced with the choice of, do I have to vote selectively? Will I have to not vote? Do I have to not recommend men for jobs, because women aren't getting any? I mean, so then you have to come to a decision. Sometimes you have to say, some guy is not—I'm not going to push some guy equally deserving, because they don't have any women. You know?

[00:12:18.38]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Yes. So you're pushed into a kind of polarity, whether you want to or not.

[00:12:22.31]

JANET FISH: Sometimes you have to decide, I think, to go with the polarity. I like to keep some looseness about it, and not have to do that. But I think the problem, for instance, is that women have a right to be as mediocre as men. And that is the situation that's not allowed right now.

[00:12:41.21]

BARBARA SHIKLER: It's not allowed. And definitions of mediocre aren't established either [they laugh], which is a very difficult thing. How does it work within your circle of friends, those who are painters, let's say, or artists of any kind. In a social setting where you're with your peers, both male and female, does it come up as an issue?

[00:13:02.87]

JANET FISH: No. But then, I mean, I've probably weeded out of my circle of friends those people where it is an issue. I don't really associate with them. And the people I'm friendly with really are—the men are easy with women who are doing things. They're not threatened. And they either feel secure in themselves—they're doing something, or whatever. And I don't know people that are threatened. And when I do run into someone like that, I really choose not to know them any further.

[00:13:34.35]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Who are some of those men that you feel are, as painters as artists, broad in their attitudes towards "broads?" [They laugh.]

[00:13:43.25]

JANET FISH: Broad towards broads. I think Jack Beal is, and Chuck Close. And, well, I used to be friends with Joe Zucker when he lived in the building. I never had any thought of him as any way—this thing that people run into—I don't know. I mean, I always found—just thinking, John Moore, I mentioned him. Why is my mind going blank?

[00:14:17.05]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Because I asked you a direct question. That's why. [They laugh.] I'm about to ask you another one. Who are those in your circle of friends today?

[00:14:26.41]

JANET FISH: Well, my close friend, of course, Harriet Shorr, lives around the corner. And we are always running over to check each other's paintings when they're just done or making very severe comments and things. And then I have other friends who—well, Gregori Aminoff, there's another name of a guy, who I think—he's married to a painter who holds her own pretty well.

[00:14:51.85]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Who's that?

[00:14:52.96]

JANET FISH: Vicki Faust, he's married to. She's very determined to maintain her own integrity. But here in New York, gee, I mean, I have other friends who just aren't artists, I

mean, like Romulus Linney, who's a playwright. And then there's Edmond Leites, who is a philosopher, and his friend. I mean, these people are—I mean, we seem to see regularly. lot Paro is a painter. And we see her and her husband.

[00:15:34.99]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Is there any kind of—

[00:15:36.85]

JANET FISH: Altoon Sultan.

[00:15:38.32]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Sultan.

[00:15:38.65]

JANET FISH: And Mary Jo Wade. Well, all the people whose work I've got on the wall. [Laughs.]

[00:15:45.43]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Yes. Are you involved politically at all? Do you do you see this issue as an extension of a larger political—

[00:15:53.74]

JANET FISH: I don't go to meetings, and I never really did go to meetings. When they were first really—when it was really political, when they were the Red Stockings and everybody around, at that time I was always working in the evening. So I never got to meetings because the meetings were in the evening. And then later on I basically felt like I knew what was being—I don't respond well to meetings. I get very aggravated. My political involvement, in a sense, is that whenever I have a chance to make a difference, I do it so that—that's why I've stayed on the Skowhegan board, is really to try and keep—to try and keep pointing up. But they need people there. Any time when I'm in a position to—

[00:16:44.92]

BARBARA SHIKLER: To make a difference.

[00:16:46.10]

JANET FISH: —to make a difference, I try to.

[00:16:47.90]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Who's on the board with you at Skowhegan now?

[00:16:50.06]

JANET FISH: Oh, there's a lot of people. God, there's about 30 people on the Board of Governors.

[00:16:57.83]

BARBARA SHIKLER: How many women?

[00:16:59.99]

JANET FISH: It's pretty equal. See, this is a big fight. And it's not equal. But it's more than—let's say it's less than half, but it's better than other places.

[00:17:13.90]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Yes.

[00:17:15.73]

JANET FISH: But one time, though, because of heavy campaigning on my part at that time, we had four—we'd had situations with only men teaching, or maybe four men and one woman. One summer, we had four women and one man. So many people took me aside afterwards and said, "This must never be allowed to happen again. We must have equality."

[00:17:40.48]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Fascinating, never worked in reverse.

[00:17:42.64]

JANET FISH: Never worked in reverse. And, I mean, I suspect that—this summer I haven't gone to any meetings. And it's looking like there weren't many women at this point.

[00:17:51.88]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Fascinating how entrenched it is.

[00:17:54.01]

JANET FISH: Yeah.

[00:17:54.49]

BARBARA SHIKLER: Just fascinating. It seems to me that we've more or less covered it, and should say goodbye.

[00:18:06.95]

JANET FISH: Okay.

[00:18:07.85]

BARBARA SHIKLER: So goodbye.

[00:18:08.60]

JANET FISH: Bye.

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]